



Road cutters in the north of Cameroon

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 09/08/2018

Histoire & stratégie

Following a law enforcement operation in the north of CAMEROON, this feedback underlines the importance of cross-border conflicts in Central African countries. The organisation of the groups, the increasingly modern means implemented and the determination they show show the extent of insecurity and call for reflection on the action of the State in these landlocked regions.

During this year, the Consul of the Republic of Chad in Cameroon went several times to recover the bodies of Chadian non-commissioned officers who had died, among road blockers, in ambushes set by Cameroonian gendarmes. These tragedies, which were already beginning to be forgotten, seem to be regaining a new lease of life.

The coupeurs de route are highway bandits, organized in armed gangs, who attack road users. However, it remains very difficult to identify the identity of the actors or the objectives they pursue. It is an almost ancestral practice, which has developed and continues to modernize over time. They are using larger, more sophisticated means and constantly evolving methods of operation: in the past, they used to rob passers-by or isolated vehicles and extort only money. Today, they attack large convoys, even when escorted by law enforcement officers, loot villages in broad daylight, attack symbols of traditional local authority, target soldiers, kidnap and hold people for ransom. In addition to money, they steal mobile phones and vehicles (especially 4x4s). They use satellite phones to coordinate their operations. It is a form of itinerant crime. The coupeurs de route can be peasants or thugs coming from the cities to operate in the countryside. Increasingly, they come from dissident military factions in countries bordering Cameroon that have been experiencing serious instability in recent years. It is therefore a very complex phenomenon to apprehend and combat, but one that calls for urgent and appropriate measures. Its impact on the life of the country is very harmful: it threatens the security of the population, affects the credibility and international prestige of the country and, finally, slows down tourism and trade.

In the face of this creeping nebula, what has been the State's reaction and what is the current situation on the ground?

An analysis of the "Lom-Kadeii" operation, which addresses security and development issues by opening up the region (sub-regional road, Chad/Cameroon pipeline, Cotton Industrial Company), makes it possible to examine the responses of the Cameroonian state, then take stock of the situation in order to suggest elements for updating or, at the very least, avenues for reflection in the government's quest to curb this insecurity.

Since the 1990s, the government has been engaged in a relentless fight against this scourge through measures aimed at regaining control in the region, some permanent and others circumstantial.

Among the permanent measures, the security forces have been reinforced with the creation of brigades, squadrons and companies. The nomadic pastoralist populations living in the bush have been regrouped in villages. Specialized elite units have been created and equipped to deal with the threat, to the extent of the threat, and to the extent of the security situation. Specialized elite units were created and equipped according to the threat, such as the GPIGN[1] based on the model of the French GIGN, which provides mentoring; and the BIR[2] based on the model of Israeli counter-guerrilla units.

On an ad hoc basis, specific missions are carried out on the spot to reinforce the action of territorial units. Such was the case with Operation Lom-Kadeii, which covered the eastern and Adamaoua provinces, as well as controlling the two borders with Chad and the Central African Republic.

Operation Lom-Kadeii' was set up following three sombre events that seriously plunged Cameroon into mourning. In the space of a month, coupeurs de route had looted a village, killed gendarmes in an ambush and attacked a camp of the "Dragage" company, company responsible for the construction of the sub-regional road between Cameroon and Chad, causing work to stop and penalties to be imposed on Cameroon. Gendarmerie squads and army detachments were completely overwhelmed. The GPIGN was therefore created to regain control of the area and help restore State authority. My mission was therefore to ensure security on the route of the sub-regional road under construction, to enable Drage to continue its work, and to control the entire Lom-Kadeii area.

The Lom-Kadeii region, as large as Brittany, is located in the north of Cameroon between Nigeria, Chad and the Central African Republic. The population is therefore very cosmopolitan, highly under-educated and nomadic, with a traditional chieftaincy that is still very much alive. Two large forest and natural reserves exist in the region and can be uninhabited over distances of more than 50 kilometres. All these elements have transformed Lom-Kadeii into a lawless territory where the road cutters can reign as absolute masters. Apart from these difficulties related to the size of the area, there were other equally important ones:

- the management of three international borders and their migratory flows due to the highly commercial nature of the region, which is home to three major border markets;
- the presence of international workers with high purchasing power, which attracts the attention of highway robbers and other bandits from elsewhere; it is the area of all kinds of trafficking (sexual, drugs, precious stones, protected animals).

Out of fear of international opinion, which is very sensitive to military operations, the high command has established very strict rules of engagement. As head of the "Lom-Kadeii"

mission, the responsibility for actions in the area fell to me. Some of them were so contradictory that it was enough to leave the field to the thugs. Finally, the coupeurs de route added an additional difficulty as soon as we arrived, by varying their modes of action. From then on, they proceeded more by taking hostages from nomadic herders, whom they took into the bush or into the mountains. This had not been foreseen when preparing the mission from Yaoundé.

Despite these pitfalls, the mission remained sacred, especially as it was being followed from Yaoundé and was of interest to our international partners (USA, France, European Union), who were carrying out major projects in the area and who demanded guarantees of security in order to continue the work that had begun. My method consisted in combining flexibility and strength, organization of the area of action and intervention. First of all, it was necessary to establish dialogue and seek cooperation between local authorities (administrative, legal, military and traditional) and military leaders on the other side of the borders in order to create an intelligence, monitoring and warning network. At the same time, I launched deterrent patrols on the main routes of economic interest in order to mark our presence and impress with our equipment. I constantly had an alert group in Touboro, in the centre of the action zone. Since market days for traders and pay days for workers in large companies were high-risk times, I obtained a calendar of these events from the administrative authorities to ensure their effective protection. I set up escorts that I personally commanded. Finally, the management of each of the three companies benefited from the secondment of a trinomial for their close security, while the alert group could, on request, provide a security officer for certain trips of the sub-prefect. The commander of the GPIGN was able to obtain air support to reinforce our escorts. This work enabled us to obtain some encouraging results such as the resumption of work on the various worksites, the periodicity of contracts and the confidence of the populations and local authorities. Two rebel groups (dissidents of the Central African or Chadian Army) have been neutralized. Local Gendarmerie units were used to arrest several traffickers (drugs, ivory, rhino horns, etc.) and other illegal holders of weapons of war. Through the GPIGN commander and on the basis of our reports, the district was able to benefit from the creation of a gendarmerie company, 3 territorial brigades, 1 squadron of regional and local police forces, and a police unit. gendarmerie intervention squadron (ERPIGN), 1 army rapid intervention battalion (BIR), 3 aircraft for aerial observation.

After three months of mission, I was relieved by two other squadrons that succeeded each other until the end of the work. Unfortunately, the lull that was brought did not last long and the phenomenon resurfaced here and there with increasingly spectacular and audacious actions, close to terrorism and calling for an update of our combat methods.

There has been a great change in the attacks by road blockers. These are military tactics that are implemented with modern technological means. They are increasingly attacking military convoys, administrative authorities and large supply convoys to Chad or the CAR. Even if the frequency of attacks is not regular, they have a very strong impact and symbolism in public opinion. It is a great challenge for the government, which is suffering from this insecurity. It is constantly deploying enormous resources in terms of people and equipment to deal with it: 2 BIRs and the ERPIGN in Garoua have been set up and are heavily equipped with helicopters, light observation aircraft and communications and intelligence resources. Summit meetings between officials from neighbouring countries are held regularly and cooperation between the respective security and judicial forces is beginning to take shape. The fight against the coupeurs de route is very costly, and another handicap for the government is the hypersensitivity of the international community, which is always quick to cry out for human rights violations, although it does not necessarily apprehend the phenomenon of the coupeurs de route. Westerners cannot perceive its manifestations exactly. They often criticise the use of BIR (3rd

category force) and want the gendarmerie or the police to intervene.

In the **end**, two main lessons can be drawn from this "Lom-Kadeii" mission. Firstly, in terms of the execution of the mission.

On the one hand, the various hazards encountered confirm that a mission is never static: it is necessary to adapt constantly, according to its means, the environment and the methods of the enemy. Preparation, however refined, cannot foresee everything; it simply brings rationality and coherence to the action to be taken. This requires a great openness of mind, because the stakes can be enormous and the sensitivity of international opinion very high.

On the other hand, changes in the methods of the coupeurs de route have raised fears of the emergence of a form of terrorism with a hint of ethnic, political and religious demands that could destabilize Central Africa as a whole. This situation must be taken very seriously both by the countries directly concerned and by the international community. It requires increased vigilance at all times for the peace and stability of the subregion.

[1] Gendarmerie Polyvalent Intervention Group of the National Gendarmerie)

[2] Quick Reaction Battalion

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Release date	12/02/2021
