

Climate, Induced Migration and Farmer, Herder Conflicts: The Mediating Role of Border Delineation in the Nigeria, Cameroon Bakassi Peninsula Fallout

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Abstract— This paper examines the intricate nexus between climate, induced environmental stress, human migration, and violent conflict, with a specific focus on the mediating and exacerbating role of international border delineation. Using the protracted dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula between Nigeria and Cameroon as a critical case study, it argues that climate change acts as a threat multiplier in a historically contested border region, transforming environmental scarcity into geopolitical and inter-communal tension. The analysis traces how rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and freshwater salinization in the Gulf of Guinea have degraded livelihoods, forcing communities, primarily Nigerian fishers and farmers, to migrate inward. This movement intersects with pre-existing patterns of herder migration from Nigeria's arid north, also intensified by climate pressures, leading to heightened competition over arable land and resources in Nigeria's border states. The paper posits that the ambiguous and contested nature of the Nigeria, Cameroon border, culminating in the 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling ceding Bakassi to Cameroon, created a unique zone of legal uncertainty, weak governance, and militarization. This environment mediated the translation of climate, induced migration into violent farmer, herder conflicts. The border delineation did not merely provide a backdrop but actively shaped the pathways of displacement, the contestation of citizenship and land rights, and the efficacy of state responses. Through an interdisciplinary lens combining political geography, environmental security, and conflict studies, this paper concludes that effective conflict resolution in the region must simultaneously address the twin challenges of climate resilience and post-adjudication borderland integration, moving beyond purely legalistic solutions to incorporate human security and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Climate, Induced Migration; Farmer; Herder Conflict; Bakassi Peninsula; Nigeria; Cameroon Relations; Gulf of Guinea; International Court of Justice.

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is increasingly characterized by complex security challenges where traditional geopolitical disputes intersect with non, traditional, systemic threats like climate change (Adejumo, et al., 2021; Egbara, et al., 2024). Nowhere is this interplay more evident than in border regions of the Global South, where state sovereignty, community identity, and human livelihoods are rendered precarious by environmental change and political flux. The central thesis of this paper is that climate, induced migration serves as a potent vector for conflict in situations where international borders are contested or recently demarcated, with the border delineation process itself acting as a critical mediating variable that shapes the intensity, geography, and nature of conflict. This study investigates this dynamic through the lens of the Bakassi Peninsula fallout between Nigeria and Cameroon.

The Bakassi Peninsula, a resource, rich mangrove swamp and fishing ground in the Gulf of Guinea, became the subject of a prolonged territorial dispute following the ambiguous colonial, era demarcations between British, administered Nigeria and French, administered Cameroon. The dispute culminated in a 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that granted sovereignty to Cameroon, a decision based largely on colonial, era Anglo, German agreements (Shaw, 2005; Aliu, et al., 2024). The implementation of this ruling, finalized in 2008, involved the ceding of territory, the relocation of populations, and a reconfiguration of sovereignty that left thousands in a legal and existential limbo (Ngang, 2017; Mbey, 2018; Mbey, et al., 2024; Waliya & Mbey, 2024).

Simultaneously, the wider West African region, and Nigeria in particular, is experiencing profound climate stress. The Lake Chad Basin has shrunk by over 90% since the 1960s due to climatic variability and human water usage, displacing millions and driving pastoralist communities southwards in search of pasture (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Ironbar, et al., 2025). In the coastal south, rising sea levels, estimated at 3.5 mm/year in the Gulf of Guinea, higher than the global average, and intensified coastal erosion are salinizing freshwater systems, degrading farmland, and destroying fishing grounds (Nwilo et al., 2020; Gregory & Fruebi, 2024). These environmental changes are triggering significant human mobility, with affected populations moving inward, often into the very border regions like Cross River State that are absorbing Bakassi returnees and are already sites of historical inter, ethnic tension.

This paper argues that the climate, migration, conflict nexus in this context cannot be understood without centering the role of the Bakassi border delineation. The ICJ ruling and its aftermath created a specific set of conditions: a sudden change in nationality for some, a retreat of Nigerian state authority, the emergence of ungoverned spaces, the militarization of the border, and a crisis of land access and citizenship for displaced populations (Agbiboa, 2014; Chuka, et al., 2024). This context mediated the

arrival of two distinct streams of climate migrants, coastal dispossessed farmers/fishers from the Bakassi axis and pastoralists from the northern drylands, into a constricted and contested geographical space. The resulting competition over diminishing arable land and water resources has erupted into widespread, often deadly, farmer, herder conflicts across Nigeria's Middle Belt and southern regions, with significant spillovers into the borderlands (Owa, et al., 2017; Ayana et al., 2018; Ekpo, et al., 2018).

The significance of this study lies in its integration of three critical but often separately analyzed phenomena: climate change impacts, international legal adjudication on borders, and sub, national communal conflict. It moves beyond deterministic "climate war" narratives to show how political and legal structures determine whether environmental stress translates into violence. The paper employs a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on documentary analysis of legal texts, historical accounts, policy documents, satellite data on environmental change, and secondary sources reporting on conflict incidents and migration patterns. The analysis is structured as follows: following this introduction, a comprehensive literature review establishes the theoretical frameworks. The paper then provides the historical and geopolitical context of the Bakassi dispute. Subsequent sections detail the climate change drivers in the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel, analyze the resulting migration patterns, and explicate the farmer, herder conflict complex. The core analytical section examines the mediating role of the border delineation. The final sections discuss implications for policy and theory before concluding.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research sits at the intersection of several scholarly debates: environmental security, climate migration, border studies, and the political ecology of conflict.

Environmental Security and Climate, Conflict Nexus

The debate on environmental security, spurred by the works of Homer, Dixon (1999), posits that environmental scarcity, of renewable resources like cropland, water, and forests, can generate social conflict through mechanisms such as constrained economic productivity, population displacement, and the weakening of institutions. Critics like Gleditsch (2012) caution against environmental determinism, arguing that political and economic factors are more primary, with climate acting as a "threat multiplier" rather than a sole cause. The "Climate Wars" thesis, popularized by scholars like Welzer (2012), finds resonance in contexts like Darfur, often labeled the first climate war. More nuanced approaches, such as those by Burke et al. (2009), use quantitative methods to correlate temperature increases with conflict risk in Africa. This paper aligns with the threat multiplier perspective, arguing that climate, induced resource scarcity creates a backdrop of vulnerability which, when channeled through specific

political and legal structures like a contested border, increases the likelihood of violent conflict.

Climate, Induced Migration and Displacement

The discourse on climate migration distinguishes between voluntary, adaptive mobility and forced displacement. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) recognizes that climate change increasingly drives human mobility, particularly in low, adaptive, capacity regions. In West Africa, patterns are complex: cyclical pastoralist migration is being altered in timing and direction, while sudden, onset disasters (floods) and slow, onset processes (sea, level rise, desertification) are displacing agrarian and coastal communities (Black et al., 2011). Studies on the Lake Chad crisis (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014) and coastal West Africa (Abila et al., 2021) document these flows. However, less explored is how these migration corridors intersect with zones of geopolitical adjudication and how the legal status of migrants (e.g., as internally displaced persons, returnees, or de facto stateless persons) influences their vulnerability and potential for conflict.

Border Delineation, Sovereignty, and Borderland Dynamics

Border studies have evolved from viewing borders as fixed lines to understanding them as dynamic social, political, and economic processes (Newman, 2006). The act of border delineation, especially through international legal arbitration, is a moment of profound transformation. It can solidify state authority or create "liminal" spaces where sovereignty is fragmented and contested (Agnew, 2008). The work of Nugent (2002) on African borderlands highlights their roles as zones of opportunity and insecurity. In the Bakassi case, the ICJ ruling represents a classic imposition of a colonial boundary logic (*uti possidetis juris*) over lived human and ecological realities (Ngang, 2017). This created what Menkhaus (2010) might term a "governance vacuum," where state authority is absent or predatory, non, state actors flourish, and communities resort to self, help, including violence, to secure resources and identity.

Farmer, Herder Conflicts in West Africa

Extensive literature exists on farmer, herder conflicts in Nigeria and the Sahel, traditionally attributed to factors like population growth, agricultural expansion, and ethnic, religious differences (Blench, 2004; Gregory & Adie, 2025). Recent scholarship, however, increasingly highlights the role of climate change in exacerbating these conflicts by altering vegetation patterns, drying up water points, and elongating migration routes (Moritz, 2010; Ayana et al., 2018). These conflicts are also framed within broader crises of governance, land tenure insecurity, and the proliferation of small arms (ICG, 2017). This paper contributes by linking these inland conflicts to a

specific coastal geopolitical shock (the Bakassi fallout), arguing that the border delineation concentrated displaced populations and altered local political economies, thereby intensifying competition in receiving areas.

Theoretical Synthesis: A Mediated Pathway Model

This paper synthesizes these strands into a "mediated pathway" model. It proposes that:

1. **Climate Change (CC)** acts as a distal driver, inducing environmental degradation (ED) in both coastal and arid zones.
2. **Environmental Degradation** necessitates livelihood adaptation, primarily through migration (CIM, Climate, Induced Migration).
3. This migration flows into **Receiving Areas** which possess their own pre, existing social, economic, and political conditions.
4. The critical mediating variable is the **Border Delineation Event (BDE)** – e.g., the ICJ ruling and implementation). This event directly shapes the receiving areas by: (a) determining the legal and identity status of migrants, (b) altering land tenure and access regimes, (c) reconfiguring state security presence and governance capacity, and (d) intensifying inter, group competition over a redefined "national" space.
5. The interaction of CIM with the conditions created by the BDE in the receiving areas significantly increases the probability of **Violent Conflict (VC)**, specifically farmer, herder clashes. This model positions the border not as a passive boundary but as an active, politically constructed institution that filters and transforms the impacts of climate stress.

HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: THE BAKASSI PENINSULA DISPUTE

Colonial Origins of the Boundary Ambiguity

The roots of the Bakassi conflict lie in the late 19th century "Scramble for Africa." The 1885 Berlin Conference recognized the colonial ambitions of European powers without clear demarcation. The boundary between British Nigeria and German Kamerun was initially defined by the 1913 Anglo, German Agreement, which referenced the "thalweg" (deepest channel) of the Akwayafe River. However, the mapping was imprecise, and the status of Bakassi, inhabited predominantly by the Efik and other Nigerian, linked ethnic groups, remained ambiguous (Shaw, 2005; Owa, et al., 2020; Owa, et al., 2024). Following World War I, German Kamerun was partitioned between France and Britain under League of Nations mandates, with Britain administering its sector (Northern and Southern Cameroons) as part of Nigeria. This further complicated loyalties and administrative boundaries.

Post, Independence Tensions and the Road to the ICJ

At independence in 1960, 61, a UN plebiscite led to Northern Cameroons joining Nigeria and Southern Cameroons joining the Republic of Cameroon. The maritime boundary, including Bakassi, remained disputed. Nigeria, based on historical settlement and effective administration, claimed the peninsula. Cameroon relied on the 1913 treaty. Skirmishes occurred throughout the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in a major military confrontation in 1994 (the "Operation Tiger Claw" incident), where Nigerian forces occupied parts of Bakassi (Ate, 2008). To avoid wider war, Cameroon filed a case at the ICJ in 1994.

The ICJ Ruling (2002) and the Green Tree Agreement (2006)

In its landmark 2002 decision, the ICJ upheld the primacy of the colonial treaty, awarding sovereignty over Bakassi to Cameroon. The Court prioritized the principle of *uti possidetis juris* (maintenance of colonial borders upon independence) over Nigeria's arguments of historical consolidation and effective control (ICJ, 2002). The ruling was a seismic shock in Nigeria, met with public outcry. A subsequent UN, mediated agreement, the 2006 Green Tree Agreement, laid out a two, year phased withdrawal of Nigerian troops and civil administration, with guarantees for the protection of Nigerian nationals choosing to remain (UN, 2006).

Implementation and Its Humanitarian Fallout

The implementation from 2006, 2008 was fraught. While hailed as a peaceful resolution, it created a humanitarian crisis. An estimated 50,000, 100,000 Nigerians, many of whom identified as Nigerian for generations, faced a stark choice: remain under Cameroonian sovereignty or relocate to Nigeria (Ngang, 2017). Those who left became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), often relocated to makeshift camps in neighboring Cross River State, notably in Akpabuyo and other border localities. The Nigerian state's promised resettlement support was widely reported as inadequate, slow, and marred by corruption (Agbibo, 2014). This mass, politically, induced displacement created a pool of vulnerable, discontented populations in the Nigerian borderlands, whose livelihoods had been tied to the rich aquatic resources of Bakassi.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A DRIVER OF ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS AND MIGRATION

Coastal Degradation in the Gulf of Guinea and the Bakassi Area

The Bakassi Peninsula and Nigeria's southern coastline are experiencing severe climate impacts. The IPCC (2022) identifies West Africa as a hotspot for sea, level rise vulnerability. Regional studies indicate rates of 3.5, 4.0 mm/year, exacerbating coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion, and the loss of mangrove ecosystems (Nwilo et al., 2020).

Bakassi's low, lying mangrove swamps are particularly susceptible. Salinization of freshwater creeks and soils devastates subsistence agriculture and contaminates drinking water. Increased frequency and intensity of storm surges further damage infrastructure and fishing communities. A study by Abila et al. (2021) on Nigerian fishers found that over 70% reported declining catches linked to environmental changes, forcing changes in fishing grounds and livelihoods. This environmental scarcity directly undermines the primary economic base of the Bakassi populace, acting as a push factor for migration independent of, but compounded by, the political displacement.

Desertification and Resource Scarcity in the Nigerian Sahel

At the other climatic extreme, northern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin are grappling with intensified aridity. The shrinkage of Lake Chad, from approximately 25,000 km² in the 1960s to less than 2,000 km² today, is a iconic symbol of climate change and unsustainable water use (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). Rainfall variability has increased, pasturelands have diminished, and traditional dry, season migration routes (transhumance) for Fulani pastoralists have been disrupted. This has forced herders to move further south and for longer durations into Nigeria's Middle Belt and southern regions, zones traditionally dominated by sedentary agriculture (Ayana et al., 2018). This southward drift is a well, documented climate adaptation strategy, but it brings pastoralists into competition with farmers over land and water resources.

Convergence of Migration Streams

Two distinct climate, induced migration streams thus converge on Nigeria's border states, especially Cross River, Benue, and Taraba:

1. **Stream A (South, North Inland):** Displaced Bakassi returnees and other coastal communities moving inland from the south, seeking arable land and new settlements after losing their coastal/estuarine livelihoods.
2. **Stream B (North, South):** Pastoralist groups, primarily Fulani herders, moving southwards from the arid north in search of pasture and water. This convergence creates a "pressure cooker" effect in the border regions. These areas, already characterized by complex ethnic mosaics and often weak government presence, must absorb these dual inflows, dramatically increasing pressure on finite land and water resources.

THE FARMER, HERDER CONFLICT COMPLEX IN NIGERIA

Evolution and Drivers of the Conflict

Farmer, herder violence has become one of Nigeria's most severe security challenges, causing more fatalities than the Boko Haram insurgency in some years (ACLED, 2022). Traditionally localized and managed through customary mechanisms, conflicts have escalated in scale, frequency, and weaponry. The core driver is competition over land and water. Cultivation expands into grazing reserves and stock routes, while cattle destroy crops. However, this competition is overlaid with other factors: ethnic polarization (often framed as indigenous "farmers" vs. migrant "herders"), religious differences (predominantly Christian farmers vs. Muslim herders), the proliferation of small arms from regional conflicts, and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution institutions (ICG, 2017).

The Role of Climate Change

Climate change intensifies this competition by constraining the resource base. Diminished pasture in the north compels earlier and more protracted southward movement, increasing the period of farmer, herder interaction and potential friction. Erratic rainfall also leads to more desperate competition for water points. As Moritz (2010) notes, climate change alters the "ecology of conflict," changing the timing, location, and actors involved in disputes. This is not a simple cause, and, effect but a complex feedback loop where environmental stress exacerbates underlying socio, political fragilities.

Geographical Spread to the Borderlands

Initially concentrated in Nigeria's Middle Belt (Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa states), these conflicts have spread southwards, including to states like Cross River, Ebonyi, and Enugu (Ayana et al., 2018). This southward spread follows the herder migration corridors and brings conflict into regions receiving Bakassi returnees. In Cross River State, for instance, reports of clashes between farming communities and herders have increased in the past decade, often in areas where returnees have been settled or are competing for land (Ugwu, 2021). The borderland thus becomes a new frontline in this national conflict.

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BORDER DELINEATION: BAKASSI AS A CATALYST

This section is the core of the analysis, detailing how the Bakassi border delineation mediated the climate, migration, conflict pathway.

Creation of a Governance Vacuum and Security Dilemma

The phased Nigerian withdrawal created a period of "sovereign overlap" and subsequent vacuum. Nigerian authority waned before Cameroonian authority was firmly established, leading to a rise in piracy, illegal bunkering, and militancy (e.g., the Bakassi Freedom Fighters). This environment of lawlessness facilitated the proliferation of small arms, which have subsequently flowed into the wider region, arming both pastoralist and farmer militias (Agbibo, 2014). The militarization of the border zone by both states also created a tense environment where communities view security forces with suspicion, and informal armed groups fill the protection gap.

Mass Displacement and the Crisis of Resettlement

The ICJ ruling directly created a large, sudden IDP crisis. The Bakassi returnees were not just climate migrants; they were geopolitical pawns, their citizenship and belonging violently redefined by an international court. Their resettlement in Cross River State was poorly managed. Promised housing, land, and infrastructure were lacking, forcing returnees to squat on or purchase land, often igniting tensions with host communities over ownership and access (Ngang, 2017). This influx increased local population density and competition for prime agricultural land, making the area more sensitive to the arrival of additional resource competitors like herders.

Reconfiguration of Land Tenure and Access

The border change altered the formal and informal rules governing land. Traditional land tenure systems, linked to ancestral claims, were disrupted by the mass movement of people. The Nigerian state, in a bid to resettle returnees, sometimes allocated land without full consultation with indigenous communities. This created layered conflicts: indigenous communities vs. returnees, and both groups vs. incoming pastoralists seeking grazing land. The ambiguity of land rights in this post, adjudication space made negotiated access difficult and increased the likelihood of disputes turning violent.

Identity Politics and Citizenship Conflicts

The delineation sharpened questions of "who belongs." Returnees, though Nigerian, were often viewed as "outsiders" or "lesser citizens" by host communities. This social fragmentation eroded social cohesion and the capacity for collective, peaceful problem-solving. Concurrently, the presence of pastoralists, often framed as "foreign Fulani" from elsewhere in West Africa, added another layer of identity, based tension. In this context, climate, induced resource competition became easily framed in ethno, nationalist and religious terms, with narratives of "invasion" and "existential threat" gaining traction on all sides (ICG, 2017).

Constriction of Livelihood Options and Economic Desperation

The loss of the rich Bakassi fisheries and farmland compressed the livelihood options for returnees into a narrower range of activities, primarily rain, fed agriculture in a less fertile interior. This made them more vulnerable to any threat to their crops, such as cattle incursions. Similarly, herders faced a constricted range of viable pasture as they moved south, funneling them into the same agricultural zones. The border delineation, by removing a vast coastal resource zone from Nigeria's territory, effectively reduced the "resource buffer" available to absorb internal climate migrations, intensifying competition in the remaining space.

Weakened State Capacity and Legitimacy

The Nigerian state's failure to secure a favorable ICJ ruling and its subsequent poor handling of the resettlement process damaged its legitimacy in the eyes of the borderland communities. This perception of state abandonment or incompetence encouraged communities to resort to self, help. The formation of ethnic militias and vigilante groups (e.g., among farmer communities) and the increased arming of herder groups are direct responses to this perceived security vacuum. The state's security apparatus, often overstretched and accused of bias, struggles to manage the resulting violence, creating a cycle of impunity and retaliation.

DISCUSSION: INTERCONNECTED VULNERABILITIES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The case of Bakassi demonstrates that climate change and political boundary disputes are interconnected vulnerabilities. A purely legalistic, state, centric resolution (the ICJ ruling) failed to account for human security and environmental dynamics, inadvertently setting the stage for a new form of sub, national conflict. This has critical implications for policy.

Implications for International Law and Border Dispute Resolution

The *uti possidetis* principle, while stabilizing for interstate relations, can be disastrous for human security. Future border adjudications, particularly in climate, vulnerable regions, must incorporate mechanisms for transitional justice, citizenship guarantees, property rights compensation, and comprehensive resettlement assistance. The Green Tree Agreement was a step but proved insufficient. Post, ruling mandates should include robust, long, term UN/regional monitoring of human rights and livelihood restoration.

Implications for National Governance in Nigeria and Cameroon

1. **Nigeria** needs a integrated approach that links climate adaptation, migration management, and conflict prevention. This includes: reviving and securing grazing reserves and stock routes; implementing the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) to encourage ranching; strengthening land administration and conflict resolution institutions; and delivering justice and development impartially in border regions. Specifically for the Bakassi returnees, a transparent and fully funded resettlement program is overdue.
2. **Cameroon** must ensure the protection and full integration of Nigerians who chose to remain in Bakassi, addressing their citizenship status and preventing marginalization that could fuel further cross, border unrest.

Implications for Regional (ECOWAS) Cooperation

The transboundary nature of both climate impacts and pastoralist migration necessitates a regional response. The ECOWAS protocols on free movement and transhumance need to be updated to explicitly address climate, induced mobility. Regional early warning systems for both environmental stress and conflict hotspots, coupled with frameworks for cross, border resource management (e.g., of the Lake Chad Basin), are essential.

Climate Adaptation and Resilience Building

Investment in climate, resilient livelihoods is crucial to reduce forced migration. In the south, this means coastal defense, mangrove restoration, and promoting saline, resistant agriculture and aquaculture. In the north, it involves sustainable water management, rangeland rehabilitation, and drought, resistant fodder. Supporting alternative livelihoods can reduce dependence on climate, sensitive sectors.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the violent farmer, herder conflicts plaguing Nigeria's border regions are not isolated phenomena. They are, in part, a cascading effect of a complex interplay where climate, induced migration converges with the political and legal fallout from an international border dispute. The Bakassi Peninsula case study reveals that the 2002 ICJ ruling and its implementation were not merely background events but active mediators that structured vulnerability, displacement, and conflict. By creating a governance vacuum, mass displacement, and a crisis of land and identity in the Nigerian borderlands, the border delineation process transformed the landscape into a tinderbox. The arrival of climate, stressed pastoralists from the north then provided the spark.

The findings underscore the inadequacy of siloed responses. A security, only approach to farmer, herder conflict will fail without addressing the ecological and

livelihood drivers of migration. Similarly, celebrating the peaceful resolution of an interstate dispute is hollow if it ignores the sub, national violence it inadvertently fuels. As climate change accelerates, other contested border regions in Africa and beyond may face similar dynamics. This calls for a new paradigm in both borderland studies and environmental security, one that views borders as ecological and human systems as much as political lines, and one that recognizes that justice in an age of climate change must be both transitional and intergenerational. The lessons from Bakassi are clear: in a warming world, the lines we draw on maps can deepen the fractures in our societies, unless they are drawn with people and the planet in mind.

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