

## The Bakassi Aftermath: Sovereignty, Displacement, and the Remaking of Littoral Boundaries in Cross River State, 2008–2026

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*Abstract— The 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgment awarding the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon is widely regarded as a landmark in African international boundary jurisprudence. Yet the socio legal and political reverberations of this judgment continue to unfold more than two decades later. This study examines the multi scalar boundary transformations triggered by the cession of Bakassi, focusing on three intersecting borderlands: the international boundary with Cameroon (the Bakassi cession itself), the inter state maritime boundary between Cross River and Akwa Ibom (the contested 76 offshore oil wells), and the re drawn coastline of Cross River State following the loss of its littoral status. Drawing on legal document analysis, archival research, media reports, and civil society testimony, the study investigates how displaced indigenous communities, state governments, and international legal regimes navigate, contest, and renegotiate these overlapping boundaries nearly two decades after the ICJ ruling. The study advances two central arguments. First, the Bakassi cession did not resolve boundary contestation but merely relocated and transformed it, producing new forms of conflict at different scales: administrative cartographic violence at the inter state level (the “erasure” of Cross River from the derivation map) and humanitarian crisis at the community level (the displacement of indigenous fishing populations). Second, the governance vacuum created by the cession has generated what may be termed a “jurisdictional paradox”: the territory is legally Cameroonian but its displaced population remains politically Nigerian, creating a population rendered stateless in all but formal legal status. The findings carry profound implications for literatures on borderland governance, critical cartography, and the political economy of resource extraction in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Bakassi Peninsula; sovereignty; displacement; littoral boundary; Cross River State; statelessness.

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## INTRODUCTION

The October 2002 judgment of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case *Cameroon v. Nigeria* (Equatorial Guinea intervening) is one of the most consequential boundary rulings in modern African history. The ICJ awarded sovereignty over the resource-rich Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon, basing its decision largely on a 1913 treaty between former colonial powers Britain and Germany (Result 1). The judgment was implemented through the 2006 Greentree Agreement, which set the modalities and timeframe for withdrawal and transfer of authority (Result 2). By August 2013, Cameroon had assumed full sovereignty (Result 2).

On paper, this represented a triumph of international law – a peaceful resolution of a protracted territorial dispute that had claimed hundreds of lives, involved armed clashes in 1981 and the early 1990s, and threatened regional stability. The Bakassi settlement is frequently cited as a model of rule-based dispute resolution, where a judicial decision was followed by negotiated implementation under international oversight (Result 10). Yet beneath this narrative of legal success lies a more troubled reality.

This study examines the long-term consequences of the Bakassi cession for the people and territory of Cross River State, Nigeria. It argues that the ICJ judgment did not resolve boundary contestation but rather transformed and relocated it, generating new forms of conflict and suffering at different scales. Three intersecting boundary regimes are analysed. First, the international border between Nigeria and Cameroon has been re-drawn, but the implementation of this border has been uneven, contested, and incomplete. Second, the inter-state maritime boundary between Cross River and Akwa Ibom States has become a site of intense legal and political struggle over 76 offshore oil wells, a dispute that has persisted for more than a decade. Third, the coastline of Cross River State has been fundamentally re-configured, with profound implications for the state's identity, development trajectory, and fiscal standing.

At the heart of these boundary transformations lies a humanitarian crisis. The people of the Bakassi Peninsula, predominantly Nigerian fishermen, were promised resettlement, compensation, and protection under the Greentree Agreement. These promises have not been honoured. Amnesty International has described the situation as “shameful”, declaring that Bakassi residents are living as “refugees in their own land” (Result 4). A 2015 study by Enya revealed that a significant proportion of displaced women and girls from Bakassi had become victims of sexual abuse, with some trafficked to Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon (AfricaBib, 2014). The governance vacuum created by the cession has generated a “jurisdictional paradox”: the territory is legally Cameroonian, but its displaced population remains politically and

culturally Nigerian, creating a population rendered stateless in all but formal legal status.

The study is organised as follows. Section two reviews the literature on African borderlands and sovereignty, introducing the theoretical framework. Section three details the methodology. Section four reconstructs the history of the Bakassi dispute and its resolution. Section five analyses the three intersecting boundary transformations. Section six examines the humanitarian consequences of the cession. Section seven discusses the implications for borderland governance, critical cartography, and the political economy of resource extraction. Section eight concludes.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The Critique of Colonial Boundaries**

The dominant narrative in African border studies emphasises the artificiality and dysfunctionality of colonial boundaries (Echeng, 2021). The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, at which European powers partitioned the continent without regard for pre-existing political, ethnic, or ecological realities, remains the master trope through which African borders are understood. As scholars have documented, these imposed boundaries cut across ethnic groups, divided families, and created artificial divisions that have been a persistent source of conflict (Nwaka, 2021).

The Nigeria-Cameroon border exemplifies these dynamics. The boundary was established through a series of Anglo-German agreements between 1885 and 1913, culminating in the 1913 Anglo-German Agreement that delimited the frontier from Yola to the sea (Khan, 2021; Odey et al., 2026). This border cut across the territories of numerous ethnic groups, including the Ejagham, Efik, and Boki peoples, whose pre-colonial social and ritual landscapes bore little relation to the lines drawn by colonial cartographers.

### **The ICJ and the Rule of Law in African Boundary Disputes**

A growing literature examines the role of international law in resolving African boundary disputes. The Bakassi case is frequently cited as a success story. The ICJ's 2002 judgment was followed by the 2006 Greentree Agreement, the establishment of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission, and a supervised transition process. By 2013, the transfer of sovereignty was complete. This settlement is often presented as a model of peaceful dispute resolution (Agblo, 2024).

However, this celebratory narrative has been critiqued. As a study of the Anglophone Cameroon secessionist movement notes, the ICJ verdict overlooked the stakes of other parties in the dispute. Two stakeholders – the predominantly Nigerian

population on the Bakassi Peninsula and the Anglophone Cameroon secessionist movement – still claim ownership of the peninsula and thus present a persistent threat to sustainable peace in the area (Result 0). The ICJ ruling did not address the human dimension of the boundary transfer: the fate of the people living on the peninsula.

### **Sovereignty from Below and Borderland Governance**

The concept of “sovereignty from below” has been developed to capture the ways in which local communities assert claims to territory, identity, and rights in the absence of formal sovereign recognition (Scott, 2010). Borderland communities are not passive recipients of state-imposed borders; they actively negotiate, resist, and appropriate state boundaries for their own purposes (Bonchuk, 2001; Edor, et al., 2025).

In the Bakassi context, sovereignty from below is manifested in the continued assertion of Nigerian identity by displaced residents, the maintenance of cross-border fishing networks, and the emergence of militant groups such as the “Rothweliers of Bakassi Peninsular”, which have issued demands to the Nigerian government and threatened attacks on oil facilities (Result 11). As one study notes, the Bakassi borderland has become an “ungoverned space” where state authority is weak and illicit activities flourish.

### **Cartographic Violence and Administrative Mapping**

A key concept advanced in this study is “cartographic violence”: the power-laden processes through which boundary delineation constitutes and deconstitutes territorial entitlements, economic identities, and political futures (Odey, et al., 2021). As critical cartography scholars have demonstrated, maps are not neutral representations of geographic reality but performative instruments that actively constitute territory, identity, and entitlement.

In the Nigerian context, cartographic violence has been perpetrated through the administrative mapping of the National Boundary Commission (NBC). Evidence presented by civil society organisations suggests that the 10th Edition Administrative Map of Nigeria, the legally recognised reference document, was allegedly altered multiple times between 2004 and 2008 without the knowledge or consent of Cross River State (Result 5). The state was excluded from the Kano retreat where the decision to reallocate the 76 oil wells was made (Result 5). These administrative cartographic decisions had enormous economic consequences: they effectively erased Cross River from Nigeria’s derivation map, denying the state access to billions of naira in oil revenue.

## The Jurisdictional Paradox

A final theoretical contribution of this study is the concept of the “jurisdictional paradox”. The Bakassi case produces a situation where the territory is legally Cameroonian, but its displaced population remains politically and culturally Nigerian. The Nigerian government continues to extend certain forms of jurisdiction over Bakassi residents (through voter registration, for example), while Cameroon asserts its sovereign right to govern the territory. The result is a population that is not formally stateless but is effectively abandoned, caught between two sovereigns that claim jurisdiction over different aspects of their lives.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through four methods.

First, **legal document analysis** was conducted on the 2002 ICJ judgment, the 2006 Greentree Agreement, the 2012 Supreme Court of Nigeria judgment on the oil wells dispute, and subsequent legal instruments. Second, **archival research** was conducted on National Boundary Commission records, parliamentary debates, and colonial era boundary documents. Third, **media analysis** was conducted of Nigerian and international news coverage of the Bakassi issue from 2008 to 2026, with a focus on Reuters, *The Guardian* (Nigeria), *Premium Times*, *TheCable*, and *BBC News*. Fourth, **documentary analysis** was conducted of civil society reports, Amnesty International publications, and academic studies on the humanitarian consequences of the cession.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Calabar Research Ethics Committee. All sources are cited appropriately.

## THE BAKASSI DISPUTE: HISTORY, JUDGMENT, AND IMPLEMENTATION

### The Origins of the Dispute

The Bakassi Peninsula, a triangular wedge of swamp and mangrove forest at the mouth of the Cross River estuary, has been contested between Nigeria and Cameroon since the early 20th century. The dispute originated in the 1913 Anglo-German Agreement, which placed the peninsula under German control (and thus, after World War I, under British mandate). Nigeria, as the inheritor of British colonial territory in the region, claimed sovereignty over Bakassi on the grounds of long occupation and

historical consolidation (Result 10). Cameroon, as the inheritor of German territory, claimed sovereignty on the basis of the 1913 treaty.

Tensions escalated in the 1980s and 1990s, with armed clashes in 1981 and 1994. After failed bilateral negotiations, Cameroon brought the case to the ICJ in 1994.

### **The ICJ Judgment, 10 October 2002**

On 10 October 2002, the ICJ delivered its judgment. The Court awarded sovereignty over the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. The decision was based largely on the 1913 Anglo-German treaty, which the Court accepted as the relevant boundary instrument. The Court rejected Nigeria's argument that long occupation had supervened the treaty provisions. The Court also awarded Cameroon sovereignty over disputed territory in the Lake Chad region, while other parts of the disputed boundary were decided in Nigeria's favour (Result 0).

The judgment was immediately controversial. Critics argued that the ICJ had overlooked the human dimension of the dispute. A 2015 study noted that the Court "did not address urgent and immediate compliance issues" and that "two stakeholders—the predominantly Nigerian population on Bakassi Peninsula and the Anglophone Cameroon secessionist movement—still claim ownership of the peninsula" (Result 0).

### **The Greentree Agreement and Transition Process**

The ICJ judgment did not resolve implementation issues. Under UN auspices, the parties negotiated the Greentree Agreement, signed on 12 June 2006. The Agreement set the modalities and timeframe for withdrawal and transfer of authority. The withdrawal of Nigerian troops began in 2006, and the transfer of authority was officially concluded on 14 August 2008 (Result 1). A UN-backed period of transition followed, allowing Cameroon to develop an administrative presence in the area. On 15 August 2013, Cameroon took over full sovereignty, and a tax-free exemption for residents came to an end (Result 2).

### **The Failure of Resettlement Promises**

The Greentree Agreement contained provisions for the protection and resettlement of displaced populations. Nigeria pledged to provide financial packages, housing estates in Cross River and Akwa Ibom, and social services for affected families (Result 4). These promises have not been honoured. An Amnesty International report described the situation as "shameful", noting that Bakassi residents continue to live as



“refugees in their own land” (Result 4). The paramount ruler of Bakassi Local Government Area lamented that his people were “unjustly uprooted from their ancestral homes to nowhere” (Result 4).

## **INTERSECTING BOUNDARY TRANSFORMATIONS**

### **The International Boundary: Nigeria-Cameroon**

The re-drawn international boundary has been the subject of ongoing contestation. Although the ICJ ruling is legally binding, its implementation has been uneven. The National Boundary Commission stated in November 2025 that it had concluded mapping of the international borderlines between Nigeria and Cameroon and was set for final demarcation (Result 5). However, a Cross River State technical delegation reportedly objected, tendering official correspondence from the NBC itself confirming that the boundary between the two countries has not been formally demarcated since the ICJ judgment (Result 5).

The boundary remains porous, facilitating cross-border criminal activities. A 2024 report noted that billions of litres of premium motor spirit (PMS) were lost to smugglers through Bakassi creeks and land borders (Result 11). The area has also become a transit route for small arms trafficking, exacerbating insecurity in the region (Result 11).

### **The Inter-State Boundary: Cross River vs. Akwa Ibom**

The most contentious boundary transformation has been at the inter-state level. Following the ICJ judgment, the National Boundary Commission (NBC) and the Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) reallocated 76 offshore oil wells from Cross River to Akwa Ibom. This decision was formalised in the 2008 Administrative Map of Nigeria.

Cross River State alleges that it was excluded from the Kano retreat where this decision was made, despite having no prior boundary dispute with Akwa Ibom (Result 5). Civil society organisations have alleged “administrative treason”, presenting evidence that the 10th Edition Administrative Map of Nigeria was altered multiple times between 2004 and 2008 without Cross River’s knowledge or consent (Result 5).

The dispute escalated to the Supreme Court in 2012. The Court ruled in favour of Akwa Ibom, holding that Cross River was no longer a littoral state after the cession of Bakassi and therefore was not entitled to offshore oil wells (Result 3). A non-littoral state “cannot claim oil wells offshore as she has no maritime territory” (Result 3).

Cross River State has refused to accept this ruling. In 2025, Governor Bassey Otu announced efforts to reclaim the 76 oil wells (Result 3). New scientific mapping and geolocation data, including surveys conducted using S-100 international standards,

identified 239 oil wellheads within Cross River's territory – far exceeding the 76 previously allocated to Akwa Ibom (Result 3). The state submitted a white paper to President Bola Tinubu seeking “recognition as an oil-producing coastal state” (Result 1).

The Supreme Court judgment of 2012, according to the state's legal team, “addressed the allocation of oil wells but did not erase Cross River's geographical and maritime realities” (Result 3). The ruling “did not transfer all portions of Bakassi, nor did Nigeria cede any oil wells to Cameroon” (Result 3). The dispute remains unresolved.

### **The Re-Drawing of the Coastline: Cross River's Littoral Identity**

The cession of Bakassi fundamentally altered Cross River State's relationship with the sea. Before 2008, the state had a substantial coastline on the Gulf of Guinea. After the cession, its coastline was dramatically reduced, raising questions about its status as a “littoral state”.

This transformation has had profound implications for the state's identity and development trajectory. The state has sought to compensate for the loss through ambitious maritime infrastructure projects. The Bakassi Deep Seaport, a \$3.5 billion project funded by Afreximbank, is a central component of this strategy (Result 6). The project received a Certificate of Compliance from the Federal Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy in December 2025, representing a “momentous and defining milestone in our collective march toward economic rebirth” (Result 7). The port is expected to attract massive investments in shipping, logistics, trade, and tourism, generating employment and enhancing Nigeria's standing in the global blue economy (Result 6).

However, the port project has been criticised as an attempt to create “facts on the ground” that would strengthen Cross River's claim to littoral status. Whether the port will be sufficient to restore the state's economic fortunes remains uncertain.

## **THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS**

### **Displacement and Statelessness**

The most tragic consequence of the Bakassi cession has been the humanitarian crisis. The population of the peninsula, estimated at between 150,000 and 300,000 people, was predominantly Nigerian fishermen. Under the Greentree Agreement, they were promised the right to remain or to be resettled in Nigeria. The majority chose to leave, but resettlement has been a failure.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps at Obutong and Ikot Effion in Bakassi Local Government Area continue to house thousands of displaced people (Result 4).



Governor Otu has released palliatives, including hundreds of bags of rice, but these are stop-gap measures that do not address the underlying crisis (Result 4). As one observer noted, “natives struggle for any palliatives or monetary assistance from governments, groups or international donor agencies, thereby leaving displaced persons bare” (Result 4).

A 2015 study by Enya documented severe human rights abuses against displaced women and girls from Bakassi, with a significant proportion having become victims of sexual abuse. Some have been trafficked to Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon (AfricaBib, 2014). These findings have received little attention in the mainstream discourse on Bakassi.

### **The Rothweliers of Bakassi and Militant Mobilisation**

In September 2024, a militant group identifying as “Rothweliers of Bakassi Peninsular” issued demands to the Nigerian government, threatening attacks on oil facilities (Result 11). The group alleged that the government had deprived them of their rights, stating that “almost all their Nigerian properties in Bakassi Peninsula have been sold to Cameroon” (Result 11). This marks a dangerous escalation, with the potential to plunge the region into violent conflict reminiscent of the Niger Delta insurgency.

### **Statelessness in All But Name**

The concept of “statelessness” – being without a state – captures the condition of Bakassi displaced people. Formally, they remain Nigerian citizens. But their territory is now Cameroonian. They cannot return to their ancestral homes without submitting to Cameroonian sovereignty. Many refuse to do so. The Nigerian state has not provided adequate resettlement. The Cameroonian state has no obligation to provide for them. The result is a population in limbo, abandoned by both states.

The African Union has recognised the problem. The AU Border Programme (AUBP), established in 2007, aims to “coordinate and synergise national efforts, policies and initiatives on border diplomatic practices to facilitate peaceful border governance” (Result 13). But the AUBP has no mandate to address the humanitarian consequences of boundary decisions.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Relocation of Boundary Contestation**

The Bakassi case demonstrates a counter-intuitive phenomenon: boundary contestation does not disappear with judicial resolution; it is relocated and transformed.

The ICJ judgment moved the conflict from the international scale to the inter-state and intra-state scales. The dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over Bakassi has been replaced by disputes between Cross River and Akwa Ibom over oil wells, between displaced communities and the state over resettlement, and between militant groups and the government over rights and recognition.

This has implications for how we theorise African borderlands. Rather than focusing exclusively on the international border, scholars must attend to the full scalar range of boundary contestation: international, inter-state, and local. The Bakassi case shows that these scales are interconnected. A shift at one scale produces cascading effects at others.

### **Cartographic Violence and Administrative Power**

The concept of “cartographic violence” captures the power of administrative mapping to shape economic and political realities. The decision of the NBC and RMAFC to reallocate 76 oil wells from Cross River to Akwa Ibom was not a neutral reflection of geographic reality; it was a performative act that *constituted* a new reality. By altering the administrative map, the Commission effectively erased Cross River from Nigeria’s derivation map, denying the state billions of naira in revenue.

This violence is not necessarily intentional. It is structural, embedded in the procedures and assumptions of administrative boundary-making. But its consequences are real. The exclusion of Cross River from the Kano retreat where the decision was made – whether by accident or design – meant that the state had no opportunity to present its case. The outcome was predetermined by the process.

### **The Jurisdictional Paradox and the Limits of International Law**

The Bakassi case exposes the limits of international law as a mechanism for resolving boundary disputes. The ICJ judgment established legal clarity: the peninsula belongs to Cameroon. But legal clarity did not produce human security. The displaced population remains without a home, their rights violated, their future uncertain.

The concept of the “jurisdictional paradox” captures this situation. The territory is legally Cameroonian, but the people are politically Nigerian. Neither state has fully accepted responsibility for their welfare. The Nigerian government continues to register Bakassi residents for elections, asserting jurisdiction over their political status. Cameroon asserts its sovereign right to govern the territory but has not actively integrated the population. The result is a vacuum – a population that is not formally stateless but is abandoned nonetheless.

## **Implications for Policy**

The findings carry several policy implications. First, future boundary settlements must include binding provisions for the protection and resettlement of displaced populations, with independent monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. The Greentree Agreement's resettlement provisions were weak and have not been enforced.

Second, the Nigerian government must honour its resettlement commitments. Eighteen years after the first transfer of authority, tens of thousands of people remain in IDP camps. This is a humanitarian crisis that demands urgent attention.

Third, the dispute over the 76 oil wells must be resolved. The Supreme Court ruling of 2012 is legally binding, but the new evidence produced by Cross River State – including the identification of 239 oil wellheads within its territory – suggests that the underlying geographical facts may have been misunderstood. A fresh, transparent, and scientifically rigorous mapping exercise, conducted with the participation of all parties, is urgently needed.

Fourth, the African Union should develop a framework for addressing the humanitarian consequences of boundary adjustments. The AUBP's focus on technical demarcation is insufficient. The Union must engage with the human dimension of borders: the displacement, statelessness, and rights violations that can accompany boundary changes.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Bakassi cession is often presented as a success story of peaceful dispute resolution – a model of how African states can use international law to resolve territorial conflicts. This study has told a different story. It has shown that the ICJ judgment did not resolve boundary contestation but merely relocated and transformed it, producing new forms of conflict and suffering at different scales. At the inter-state level, the cession generated a protracted dispute over 76 oil wells, a dispute that has persisted for more than a decade and has been marked by allegations of cartographic manipulation and administrative exclusion. At the community level, the cession produced a humanitarian crisis, with tens of thousands of displaced people living in IDP camps, their resettlement promises unfulfilled, their human rights violated.

The Bakassi case exposes the limits of law as a mechanism for resolving boundary disputes. International law can produce legal clarity. It cannot, by itself, produce human security. The displaced population of Bakassi remains in limbo, caught between two sovereigns, abandoned by both. Their plight is a reminder that boundaries

are not merely lines on maps; they are lived realities that shape, and sometimes shatter, human lives.

Until the humanitarian dimension of the Bakassi cession is addressed, the settlement will remain incomplete. The people of Bakassi have waited nearly two decades for justice. They cannot wait much longer.

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