

# Government Initial Communication in Times of Crisis: A Comparative Study of the Limbe Shipwreck and the Ngarbuh Incidents in Cameroon

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## Abstract

Organisations like governments must communicate effectively to achieve shared meaning with different stakeholders. When they face crises or situations that threaten their operations, existence and reputation, communicating effectively becomes doubly imperative. Effective crisis communication requires that organisations make a comment, that is, avoid no comment, and are quick, accurate and consistent in their initial communication. This need prompted the researchers to investigate the Cameroon Government's practice of initial crisis communication in the Limbe shipwreck of August 26, 2019, and the Ngarbuh incident of February 13, 2020. The research employed the qualitative research approach. The researchers qualitatively content analysed secondary data consisting of 03 press releases, 09 editions of *The Guardian Post* newspaper, 09 website articles and 05 social media posts. The findings revealed that the Cameroon Government effectively respected all recommended principles for initial crisis communication in the case of the Limbe shipwreck but failed to do so entirely in the case of the Ngarbuh incident. In the Limbe shipwreck, the Government avoided "no-comment", and was quick, accurate and consistent in its initial communication. However, in the case of the Ngarbuh incident, the Government only avoided "no-comment" and was consistent but failed to be quick and accurate in communication. The study recommends that the Cameroon Government should be quick in all its initial crisis communication, that is, communicate within twenty-four (24) hours after the occurrence of any crisis that involves her. Communication delays intensify the spread of rumours and disinformation, which can further amplify the damage caused by a crisis.

**Keywords:** Initial Crisis Communication, Government Communication, Limbe Shipwreck, Ngarbuh Incident

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is the pillar of crisis management. It mitigates the outcomes of a crisis and counteracts the spread of falsehood. When a crisis occurs, stakeholders are eager to know more about it. They are interested in knowing its cause, consequences and recovery strategies. Their demand for information about the incident rises. When organisations fail to provide prompt and clear communication, mischievous individuals fill this vacuum by circulating unverified and misleading claims. Coombs (2009) also asserts that an organisation that is not quick in getting its message out gives room for others to tell the story of a crisis in a way that might often paint the organisation black.

Coombs (2007, p. 20) views crisis communication as the "collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation". Crisis communication follows the three phases of the crisis management process: pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis. Alongside other scholars in the domain, Timothy Coombs proposed the ideals of making a statement (avoiding "no-comment"), quickness, accuracy and consistency when communicating during crisis times.

Coombs (2007) insists that organisations communicate promptly to lessen reputational damages during crises. Prompt communication shapes the public's and stakeholders' perception of crisis (Maresh & Williams, 2010). "Research has shown repeatedly that the longer an organization takes to respond to a crisis, the more it suffers in the eyes of the public and stakeholders. This observation has become

particularly pertinent in the era of social media...” (Marsen, 2020, p. 170). In the same vein, scholars like Arpan and Pompper (2003) in Coombs (2014, p. 12) connote that “when an organisation releases information about a crisis before some other source does, the organisation suffers less reputational damage from the crisis”.

On March 08, 2014, the Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 lost contact with the Kuala Lumpur Air Traffic Control Centre (KLATCC) with all 227 passengers and 12 crew on board. It was a global crisis, as the international flight had left Kuala Lumpur airport en route to Beijing, China (Zafra, & Maydell, 2018). Malaysian Airlines communicated within hours of the plane’s missing (Kwansah-Aidoo & George, 2017), and was praised for being quick when the crisis hit. The Airline posted regular information and releases (Kwansah-Aidoo & George, 2017; Zafra, & Maydell, 2018). However, Kwansah-Aidoo and George (2017) note that the company’s failure to utilise the ‘golden hour’ allowed for “uncontrolled speculation, rumours, and innuendos to permeate social media. No press conference was scheduled within hours of the plane’s disappearance, which meant family members, the media, and the public had to rely on the posted statements on MAS social media sites” (p. 196).

Coombs (2007) also believes that initial crisis communication should avoid the “no comment” phrase. “When a spokesperson says, ‘no comment’, the stakeholders hear ‘I am guilty and trying to hide something’” (Kempner, 1995 in Coombs, 2009, p. 104). Schenck (2012) agrees that using ‘no-comment’ when asked a question in crisis times equals being interpreted as ‘guilty as charged’. The Sydney Public Relations Agency also affirms that using “no comment” as a response in crisis times is a bad idea because the truth will eventually come out. They recommend that crisis managers answer the questions in some other way, even if they provide no substantial information, rather than say “no comment”. In their view, “Never, ever say “No Comment.” Instead tell reporters the situation is still being reviewed and you will have a statement available as soon as you have all the facts” (para 7).

Organisations experiencing crisis, are also expected to communicate accurately in their initial response. Accuracy entails providing the facts as they are. It is one of the measuring rods of credibility in communication. During crises, there is no room for inaccurate or misleading information whether consciously or unconsciously disseminated. Crisis managers must endeavour to communicate accurately to meet the public’s demand for truth during a crisis. Coombs (2007) advises that when an organisation realises that they have misinformed the public in their previous communication, they should immediately replace the former information with the right content and communicate it to the public using the same information channel that they had used to convey the erroneous information.

The spokespersons should also be consistent in their initial response. Consistency warrants crisis spokespeople to speak with one voice during a crisis. Being consistent does not mean only one person speaks, but rather, that all those who speak, speak the ‘same language’ (Coombs 1999 in Marsh & Williams, 2010).

This research examines the Cameroon government’s implementation of initial crisis communication principles in two incidents. The first incident is the Limbe shipwreck of August 26, 2019. The shipwreck involved a ship christened “Austrheim” that left Calabar, Nigeria for Cameroon. The ship sank at 2 a.m. on Monday, August 26, 2019, off the coast of Limbe with 120 passengers on board. The Cameroon Navy and Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) rescued 111 passengers and retrieved 17 corpses. Some survivors of Nigerian origin returned to their country without proper identification (Nkeze, 2019). The second incident is the Ngarbuh massacre of February 13, 2020. Ngarbuh is a locality in the Donga Mantung Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. On the night of Thursday, February 13, breaking Friday February 14, armed men stormed the locality killing several individuals and others sustaining injuries. Human Rights Watch (2020, para 1) asserted that “at least 21 civilians ... including 13 children and 1 pregnant woman ...” The United Nations placed the death toll at 23, including “nine children under the age of five, and “two pregnant women, one of whom died of her injuries in hospital” (United Nations News, 2020, para 12).

This research examines the government’s initial response to the incidents. It assesses whether the government’s spokespersons avoided the “no comment” phrase, were quick, accurate and consistent in their initial response. This leads to the following research questions:

## **1.1. Research Questions**

**RQ1:** What was the Cameroon Government's initial comment following the Limbe shipwreck and the Ngarbuh incidents?

**RQ2:** How much time did it take for the Cameroon Government to respond to the Limbe shipwreck and the Ngarbuh incidents in its initial crisis communication?

**RQ3:** How accurate was the Cameroon Government in its initial crisis communication following the Limbe shipwreck and the Ngarbuh incidents?

**RQ4:** How consistent was the Cameroon Government in its initial crisis communication following the Limbe shipwreck and the Ngarbuh incidents?

This study is significant amongst others, because it provides contemporary evidence of the Cameroon government's initial response to the Limbe shipwreck and Ngarbuh incidents. This evidence can shape the government's crisis communication policies to avoid greater reputational damages. The study also demonstrates the need for the government to maintain consistency in various news releases about an incident. The research further highlights the need for media practitioners to thoroughly fact-check information during the crisis to avoid misinforming and misleading the public.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Organisational Crisis**

Crisis is any unwanted natural or man-made activity that poses a threat to an organisation's reputation. Coombs (2007) in Zamoum and Gorpe (2018, p. 207) also defines an organisational crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes". Organisational crises lead to loss of lives, financial and reputational damages and loss of properties (Coombs, 2012). There are two main prerequisites for a situation to be considered a crisis within an organisation: the situation must pose a threat to an organisation's image, and it must challenge its modus operandi (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). Coombs (2009) offers a different perspective by arguing that if relevant stakeholders believe there is no crisis, then there is none, even if operations are halted. Coombs (2009) places stakeholders' views of the situation at the forefront, in determining whether an organisation is in a crisis or not. He contends that if stakeholders believe there is a crisis, then, the organisation's responsibility lies in successfully convincing stakeholders that it is not in one – usually, by solving it or showing they are in control of the situation through several ways. Gibson (2012) adds that a crisis is usually the result of management's failure to respond appropriately to an issue, such as an emergency or an accident that requires a timely response and communication.

### **2.2. Crisis Management**

Crisis management is the pathway to handling a crisis. Simola (2014) asserts that crisis management is a pre-emptive process that involves dealing with a crisis before, during and after the crisis occurs. Coombs (2014) highlights that the principal objective of crisis management is to prevent the occurrence of a crisis and to reduce the harm a crisis can perpetrate on an organisation and its stakeholders. Coombs (2012) splits crisis management into pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis phases. The pre-crisis phase contains signal detection, prevention and crisis preparation. In the pre-crisis phase, companies prevent the crisis from occurring after detecting a signal or preparing for its management to reduce its effects. This requires a functional crisis management plan and team. The plan specifies the activities and functions of employees during crises.

The crisis phase is also split into recognition and containment (Coombs, 2012). Crisis recognition requires organisations to react quickly and tactically to reduce the extent of the damage. They are expected to avoid "no-comment", and be quick, accurate and consistent in their reactions and communication. Zamoum and Gorpe (2018) stress that support from public relations is heavily observed at this stage since they develop the messages to be sent to all stakeholder groups, ensuring that public safety is the most important aspect. At crisis containment, organisations address the effects of a crisis. Initial crisis communication occurs at the crisis recognition stage, while reputation repair occurs at the crisis containment stage.

In the post-crisis phase, the affected company evaluates the effectiveness of their response plan (its strengths and weaknesses), and members' activities during the crisis, and devises strategies to

strengthen its response plan. Crisis containment strategies (reputation repair) also pull through in this phase. One of the most effective ways to repair the reputation, as recommended by Benoit (2004), is the use of mortification by crisis managers to solve a crisis. This involves asking for forgiveness from those affected by the crisis. The goal of mortification is to rebuild the public's trust in the organisation and restore the company's reputation. For mortification to occur, the company should accept responsibility for the crisis.

Zamoum and Gorpe (2018) explain that the crisis management team should have sound mental attributes such as patience, self-confidence, calmness, carefulness, and self-control. This is because crisis management requires critical thinking to adequately devise strategies that prevent, solve and evaluate a crisis. A perturbed mind is distracted from reality and this affects workers' reasoning abilities to prevent, solve and evaluate a crisis. Jin (2009) recommends that having a rudimentary knowledge of psychology is essential for the crisis management team. Knowledge acquired in psychology enables the crisis response team to control the negative psychological attributes to address a crisis. The response team should equally master their environment and laws operating in the nation (Heath, Lee & Ni, 2009). The team should know the cultural, and legal environment governing their stakeholders. This prevents the team from making utterances that can fuel an existing crisis rather than solving it.

Zamoum and Gorpe (2018) also suggest that a crisis management team should be able to develop a media communication plan that would be used to communicate with the different stakeholders of a company during and after a crisis. The media communication plan specifies who is to communicate to the public during and after a crisis, the choice of medium to be used, the message to be disseminated, and the time and frequency for the planned messages to be disseminated to the public. It is expected that the crisis communication team should be honest, accurate and objective in their communication.

The crisis management team should involve opinion leaders, local and international non-governmental organisations and members of the host community. Coombs (1999) advises that crisis management teams should involve employees. Barton (2001) affirms that employees' valuable insight may help the team to determine the causes of the crisis, which is a step in rebuilding the corporate image of the affected company.

### **2.3. Crisis Communication**

Swedish Emergency Management Agency, SEMA, (2008) defines crisis communication as the exchange of information between an organisation, public authorities, affected individuals and media organs before, during and after a crisis. Chrisman (2012) adds that crisis communication is any form of communication that occurs outside an individual's established routines. Crisis communication requires prompt response. Comfort (2006) enunciates that crisis communication should be more flexible and credible than any form of communication. Delays, negligence, or falsehood can amplify reputational damages and financial loss.

If well strategized, crisis communication can prevent crisis occurrence or mitigate the effects of an existing one. Contrarily, a poorly planned and executed crisis communication can aggravate the effects of an existing crisis. SEMA (2008) acknowledges that an effective crisis communication plan or endeavour should sufficiently reach out to its target audience, indicate who is in the position to communicate to the public before, during and after a crisis situation, identify the choice of medium to be used, the message to be disseminated, and the time and frequency for the message to be disseminated to the public.

### **2.4. Initial Crisis Response**

Initial crisis response sets guiding parameters for an organisation's crisis communication. It provides guidelines on how an organisation is to communicate during a crisis situation. Coombs (2009) recommends that initial crisis communication needs to avoid no comment and be quick, accurate and consistent. Coombs (2007, p. 8; Institute for Public Relations, 2007, para. 28) outlines eight initial response best practices.

1. Be quick and try to have an initial response within the first hour.
2. Be accurate by carefully checking all facts.
3. Be consistent by keeping spokespeople informed of crisis events and key message points.



4. Make public safety the number one priority.
5. Use all of the available communication channels including the Internet, Intranet, and mass notification systems.
6. Provide some expression of concern/sympathy for victims
7. Remember to include employees in the initial response.
8. Be ready to provide stress and trauma counselling to victims and their families, including employees.

## **2.5. Ethical Issues in Crisis Management**

Ethics promotes moral attitude and behaviour in an organisation. It states what is expected of crisis managers and employees during a crisis. The following constitute some ethical principles during a crisis.

**Be Truthful:** This ethical principle denounces lies telling during crises (Coombs, 2007). By this principle, crisis managers are to tell the truth about the cause of the crisis, the financial and material damage incurred, and the parameters taken in resolving the crisis. Attempts to cover up a problem can aggravate a crisis and adversely affect the reputation of a company. Investigative journalists may expose the truth, and this leads to public distrust.

**Be open to public criticism:** Crisis managers are expected to be open to criticisms emanating from stakeholders, policymakers, and interest groups. This is because criticisms bring out certain weaknesses of a company's product or service or activity and identifiable weaknesses can be transformed into strengths. Rather than apply a defensive approach to public criticism, it is recommended that crisis managers be open to listen attentively and work on their weaknesses.

**Show concern/sympathy to victims:** Crisis managers are expected to show those adversely affected by a crisis that they truly care and are concerned about what has happened to/with them. They must take into consideration all those who have been affected by an existing crisis. Due to a crisis, victims may have lost loved ones, their finances, properties, become ill, and had to evacuate, etc. Studies have proven that less reputational damage is experienced when an organisation shows concern for victims during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Dean, 2004; Kellerman, 2006).

**Apology:** Crisis managers are expected to apologize to their stakeholders during crises if they are in the wrong. They are to send apologies to their different stakeholders using appropriate crisis communication channels such as an intranet, website and social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube). This helps affected companies to build and enhance relationship trust between and among stakeholders.

**Ingratiation:** This ethical principle requires crisis managers to appreciate the efforts and contributions of their stakeholders in solving a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Rather than neglecting the contributions (no matter how small) of their stakeholders, crisis managers should applaud. This serves as a motivation in resolving a crisis, as at such times, even the slightest ill intent can be fatal.

**Confidentiality:** Confidentiality is the ability to keep classified documents from the public's eyes or ears. The International Union for Railways (UIC) (2007) asserts that crisis managers are to keep confidential documents far from external bodies. This is because external bodies such as competitors or disguised individuals can use the information to create a crisis or fuel the flames of an existing one.

## **2.6. Theoretical Framework**

*Situational Crisis Communication Theory.* Timothy Coombs (2007) developed this theory to understand how an organisation should communicate during a crisis. It identifies response strategies to handle a crisis (Amaresan, 2023). In using this theory, Amaresan (2023) asserts that organisations should identify the type of crisis they are facing before responding publicly on social media, writing up a notice on their website or sending a press release. The nature of the crisis determines the public communication strategy to adopt. The author also advises corporations to choose an internal crisis communication strategy that prompts honest and transparent communication with employees since they have a role to play in addressing the crisis.

Coombs (2019) describes four main crisis communication approaches to plan for stakeholder responses. They include rebuilding, diminishment, denial, and bolstering. The first approach rebuilds relationships

with stakeholders by redeeming the organisation's reputation. Organisations achieve this by taking responsibility for the crisis and offering apologies or compensation to those affected. The second approach, diminishment, minimises the responsibility placed on the organisation. This is done through justifying and offering excuses for the company's actions. In the third approach, denial, the organisation re-assigns the blame away from them. This is achieved by confronting the accuser(s) or blaming another party for the crisis. This strategy is suitable when organisations experience false accusations that are harmful during crises. The last approach, bolstering, positions organisations as an asset to their stakeholders. This is done by reminding stakeholders of the organisation's former good deeds and praising stakeholders for their loyalty (Amarestan, 2023).

This theory is essential to this study. It helps the government prepare and address crises. The theory demonstrates the importance of a crisis communication plan, which stipulates how an organisation communicates and who is to communicate during crises. This helps organisations to be quick to communicate, be accurate, consistent and avoid the "no comment" phrase.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This research adopts a qualitative approach. The approach is used to address the research problem. It enables the researchers to qualitatively explore and analyse documented materials on the Cameroon government's initial crisis communication of the Limbe shipwreck and Ngarbuh incidents. The materials include press releases, media reports (from The Guardian Post, Cameroon Radio Television, Cameroon Tribune, Xinhua News Site, Africanews, Cameroon-Info-net); and websites of Non-governmental Organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Voice of Nature. These are credible and objective sources. Also, the Cameroon government's press releases provide first-hand information on assessing her implementation of initial crisis communication principles. The researchers used both offline and online documented materials.

The time frame for the selection of the documented materials is Monday, August 26, 2019, to Friday, October 15, 2021. This timeframe covers the two incidents. It also allowed the gathering of sufficient and relevant information on the incidents. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the materials. The sample constitutes three press releases from Cameroon's Minister Delegate in charge of Defence, Joseph Beti Assomo, the Army Spokesperson, Colonel Cyrille Atonfack and the then Minister of Communication, Rene Emmanuel Sadi; nine editions of The Guardian Post newspaper, two articles from Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) website; two articles from Cameroon Tribune website, a story each from Africanews website, Human Rights Watch website, Cameroon info-net website, Xinhua news and Voice of Nature (VON) website; a Twitter post, a Facebook post and three YouTube posts. These sources contained information to assess the Cameroon Government's implementation of initial crisis communication principles.

A qualitative data sheet was the research instrument. It served as the data collection board. The texts extracted from the press releases, media reports, and websites were placed on the board for proper analysis. The research questions guided the researchers in the selection of relevant information. Quality control of the documented materials was ensured. Firstly, the researchers ensured that the press releases were original copies of the different Cameroon Government spokespersons. They were downloaded from a credible website (Human Rights Watch website), and the releases had the name or signature of the speaker. Also, two out of the three releases had a letterhead, stamp, signature and name of the Minister Delegate in charge of Defence and the Army spokesperson. The third release had the Coat of Arms and the name of the Minister of Communication. This guaranteed the reliability and validity of the study. The data collection lasted for one month and two weeks (from mid-September to mid-October 2020). Thematic analysis was used. The research questions enabled the researchers to identify and interpret patterns from the documented materials. Ethical considerations like objective presentation of data were employed.

### **4. FINDINGS**

#### **4.1. The Government's Initial Comments on Both Incidents**

The findings reveal the government, through the Minister of Communication, Minister Delegate of Defence, Army spokesman, and the South West Regional Governor, commented about the occurrence of the Limbe shipwreck incident, and provided information and updates on the number of casualties

and rescued persons. These spokespersons were willing to answer questions from media practitioners and avoided the “no comment” phrase. Even when the officials were still to identify the cause of the incident, they made media practitioners understand that investigations were ongoing to provide more updates about the incident.

In the Ngarbuh incident, the government’s spokespersons included the Minister of Communication, the Minister Delegate of Defence, and the Army spokesman. These officials were also willing to provide information about the incident. They issued press releases that contained details about the number of casualties and operatives involved, the masterminds of the massacre and refuted the alleged involvement of government security officials. The Communication Minister's press briefing did not include the “no comment” phrase.

In sum, the Government’s initial crisis communication of the two incidents was void of the “no comment” phrase. Government provided the public with information and updates about the incidents through official social media platforms, such as the “*Honneur et Fidelite- Armee Camerounaise*” and media practitioners.

**4.2. Time taken for the Government to Respond to Both Incidents**

In the Limbe shipwreck incident, that occurred early Monday, August 26, 2019, at around 2 a.m., it took the government 13 hours and 29 minutes to notify Cameroonians about it through a Twitter post Monday, August 26, 2019.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot of a Twitter post by the Cameroon military

Media establishments, such as British Broadcasting Corporation, Africanews, and Xinhua cited the Cameroonian army's social media profile as their source of information about the shipwreck. Offline, the Governor of the Southwest Region, Bernard Okalia Bilai, the South West Regional Delegate of Transport, Limunga Kange epse Kedze and Lieutenant-Colonel Emmanuel Sone of the Cameroon Navy provided the public with information about the shipwreck by granting interviews/press outings to media personnel.

**Table 1.** Statements made on the shipwreck

Date	Official who spoke
Monday, August 26, 2019	Capitaine de fregate Lieutenant colonel Emmanuel Sone Ajang spoke on the incident, interviewed by Davidson Maimo in Limbe (Cameroon News Agency, 2019), posted online on August 27, 2019, at 1:55p.m.
Tuesday, August 27, 2019	Governor of the South West Region, Bernard Okalia Bilai granted a press briefing in which he updated information on the death toll, a rise from 3 to 17 deaths (Lamuka, 2019).
Wednesday, August 28	Ruth Limunga Kange Epse Nkeze - South West regional delegate of transport also made a statement on the speculations bearing on the possible cause of the shipwreck (Azohnwi, 2019).

In the Ngarbuh Incident, the Government issued its first a statement on Monday, February 17, 2020 (four days after the incident), specifically, through two official statements from Joseph Beti Assomo (Minister Delegate in charge of Defence) and Colonel Cyrille Atonfack (Army spokesperson). Also, the Minister of Communication, Rene Emmanuel Sadi addressed the nation on Tuesday, February 18, 2020 (five days after the incident), through a press briefing.

On being quick, the first reaction of the Government relating to the Limbe shipwreck came within 24 hours. Contrarily, the first reaction of the Government in the Ngarbuh incident came after 96 hours. The Cameroon Government was therefore quick in its initial crisis communication following the Limbe shipwreck, but not quick in its initial crisis communication following the Ngarbuh incident.

#### **4.3. Accuracy of the Government's Initial Crisis Communication of Both Incidents**

The accuracy of initial crisis communication bore on the facts and details of the incident as provided by the spokespersons. The findings reveal that government spokespersons, Lieutenant-Colonel Emmanuel Sone of the Cameroon Navy, the Governor of the South West Region, Bernard Okalia Bilai, the Controller General Inspector of the Rapid Intervention Unit (BIR) and Commander of the Coast, Colonel Belinga Henri Ludwig, in the Limbe shipwreck were accurate in the information presented to the media and public.

*"On Monday, the Governor said three corpses were recovered immediately after the incident, with 14 others removed later"* (Kalla, 2019, para. 1) of Voice of Nature (VON) paraphrased the Governor.

*"Okalia Bilai Bernard, Governor of the South West Region told newsmen Tuesday, August 27, 2019, that 14 other corpses have been retrieved to add to the three that were recovered a few hours after the accident"* (Azohnwi, 2019, para. 2) of Cameroon info-net paraphrased the Governor.

*"We rescued 107 and we also, unfortunately, recovered three corpses,"* (Azohnwi, 2019, para. 9) of Cameroon info-net cited a military officer whose name was withheld in the news report.

*"We rescued 107 people, and unfortunately we recovered three corpses on the spot"* (Xinhua, 2019, para. 2), cited Lieutenant-Colonel Emmanuel Sone of the Cameroon Navy.

*"Colonel Belinga Henri Ludwig, Controller General Inspector of the Rapid Intervention Unit (BIR) and Commander of the Coast reached on the phone confirmed 107 rescued by mid-day yesterday 26 August 2019"* (Nkeze, 2019) of Cameroon Tribune paraphrased the Colonel.

The findings reveal that the spokespersons provided continuous updates on the shipwreck. They first reported the number of casualties at 3. This number increased to 17. Equally, 107 persons were initially rescued. This figure also increased to 111 persons.

*"It has now emerged that the number of survivors has moved from 107 to 111 owing to information that four persons on board the ship were able to swim their way to Nigeria"* (Azohnwi, 2019, para. 3).

Also, the Cameroon Government's key informants were unable to accentuate the cause of the accident and the total number of persons who boarded the ship. Cameroon Tribune reported that after a crisis meeting at the Limbe Naval Base on Tuesday, August 27, 2019, Governor Bernard Okalia Bilai was unhappy that information about the cause of the accident was farfetched. Cameroon info-net also cited the South West Regional Delegate of Transport, Limunga Kange epse Kedze:

*"Not all passengers inside the vessel were recorded. We are carrying out casualty investigations and at the end, we will know the actual number of passengers that were in the vessel. That's when we can attest if it was overloaded or not"* (Azohnwi, 2019, para. 5).

This speculation on the number of persons on board the ship at the time of the accident caused a void in available facts. Despite not being abreast with the total number of persons on board the ship and the cause of the shipwreck, the government's spokespersons communicated through media practitioners that they were working on having the missing details. A security officer assured the public that they were still carrying out operations to diagnose the cause of the shipwreck.

*"So, we are still on with investigations that have been ordered by hierarchy to get the real cause of this accident. For now, the Navy and the BIR are focused on the rescue operation,"* (Azohnwi, 2019, para. 1).



“Authorities have yet to announce a probe and other details such as the capacity of the AUSTRHEIM and whether it was overloaded or otherwise is yet to be ascertained” (Africanews, 2019, para. 5).

In the Ngarbuh incident, the Minister of Communication, Rene Emmanuel Sadi and two military officials (Minister Joseph Beti Assomo and Colonel Cyrille Atonfack) were spokespersons. Several days after the incident, they commented as follows:

“...several photographs of an alleged massacre of several people, including women and children, perpetrated by the Defence and Security Forces **on Saturday 14 February 2020**, in the locality of Ngarbuh...”, (Cameroon’s Ministry of Communication, 2020 para. 1).

“... several photographs that appeared on social networks on Saturday 15 February indicate a massacre perpetrated **the previous day...**” (Cameroon’s Army Spokesperson, 2020, para 1; Mughe, 2020a, p. 3).

“Alerted by the population, the Defense and Security Forces then deployed to Ngarbuh, in a reconnaissance operation, on **Saturday, February 15, 2020**” (Sadi, 2020, p. 4).

As to the number of casualties, the following was mentioned:

“...this incident resulted in five (05) victims, including a woman and four (4) children, far from the alleged massacre reported on social networks” (Assomo, 2020, para. 4).

“...this incident resulted in five (05) victims, including a woman and four (4) children, far from what is reported on social networks” (Atonfack, 2020, para. 4).

“The legal forces, consisting of six elite elements, responded vigorously and professionally, neutralizing seven assailants...the cross-checked balance sheet of this incident indicates five deaths, one woman and four children” (Sadi, 2020, pp.4-5).

In their separate releases, the officials categorically refuted the Cameroon military’s involvement in the Ngarbuh massacre and attributed the deaths to an accident.

“The Minister Delegate to the Presidency in charge of Defence formally denies these grotesque allegations and specifies, in the light of methodically and professionally cross-checked information, that it is simply an unfortunate fabrication about ongoing security operations in the region” (Assomo, 2020, para. 2).

“The Minister Delegate to the Presidency in charge of Defence formally denies these grotesque allegations and specifies, in the light of methodically and professionally gathered information, that it was simply an unfortunate accident, a collateral consequence of the security operations ongoing” (Atonfack, 2020, para. 2).

The Minister of Communication attributed the killings to an explosion that occurred during a shootout between Cameroon Defence Forces and the separatists’ fighters.

“During the clashes that took place, a fire broke out in a fortified shelter that contained explosives and flammable materials stored by the armed rebels. This led to blasts, followed by tongues of fire that eventually spread and reached nearby dwellings” (Sadi, 2020, p. 4-5).

The Minister of Communication in his press conference also stated:

The alleged killing of twenty-two villagers including fourteen children, by Cameroonian Defence and Security Forces in Ngarbuh is fake....The National Defence and Security Forces have once again been subjected to second-guessing and false allegations in their struggle for a return to normalcy in the North-West and South-West Regions of our country...Without any prior investigation or any crosschecking of factual data, several political activists, die-hard detractors, presenting themselves as “human rights specialists...leaders or spokespersons of political parties”, immediately stormed national and international media to attribute responsibility for the consequences of this incident to the National Defence and Security Forces through untimely and ungrounded statements, (Sadi, 2020, p. 1-3; Fokwen, 2020a, p. 2).

Minister Rene Emmanuel Sadi further disclosed that the Cameroon military is professional and cannot carry out such barbaric and inhuman acts.

Yet, how can one believe for a moment that an army as disciplined and civic-minded as ours, can loot civilian properties and kill the people whose protection and security is their mission? Under no circumstances have our Defence and Security Forces deliberately undertaken to perpetrate abuses of any kind against the civilian populations at the service of whom they are assigned. The Government therefore strongly denies the fanciful and ungrounded accusations levelled by political activists, by sponsors of secessionist armed bands, by some Non-Governmental Organizations and some national and international media against our Defence and Security Forces, (Sadi, 2020, p. 7).

Another key element as to the facts contained in the official communications pertained to the number of military operatives that were involved in the incident. Both the Army spokesperson and the minister of Communication mentioned that 06 soldiers were involved in the security operation in Ngarbuh that led to the incident.

This finding shows that the government's spokespersons of the Limbe shipwreck provided accurate information on the number of persons rescued and dead. They also updated the figures, accordingly, giving accurate and final figures within 48 hours of the wreck occurring. Contrarily, in the Ngarbuh incident, though the government's spokespersons took 04 days to react, they provided inaccurate details in their initial crisis communication following the Ngarbuh incident, concerning the date of the incident, the number and nature of casualties, number of operatives involved, and those responsible for the incident. These details were all debunked by the revelations of the Joint Commission of Inquiry established by the Cameroon Government to probe into the killings (Fokwen, 2020b, p. 3). The report established the exact date of the incident to be Thursday, February 13, breaking Friday, February 14, 2020, from about 10 p.m. This clarified the divergent dates mentioned by the different communiqués, settling the mix-up as to whether it was February 14 or 15, or Friday or Saturday. The findings also revealed that 13 civilians were killed, as opposed to the 05 earlier reported. Equally, the report of the Joint Commission stated that 05 separatists were killed, contrary to the 07 earlier reported, and three (03) government servicemen and 10 members of the vigilante committee were responsible for the killings, contrary to the statistic of 06 soldiers earlier reported.

The Joint Commission of Inquiry's findings further revealed that the government's security forces were responsible for the deaths of civilians and had deliberately concealed facts from their superiors, thereby misleading them.

Upon entering the Ngarbuh 3 neighbourhood, the place of the tragedy, the team led by Sergeant Baba Guida comprising Gendarme Sanding Sanding Cyrielle, Private 1st Class Haranga and ten (10) members of the vigilante committee, launched an attack based on information provided by a repentant terrorist and a farmer from the area. Following an exchange of gunfire, during which five (05) terrorists were killed and many weapons seized, the detachment discovered that three (03) women and ten (10) children died because of its action. Panic-stricken, the three servicemen with the help of some members of the vigilante, tried to conceal the facts by causing fires. On his return to Ntumbaw, Sergeant Baba Guida who led the operation, submitted a deliberately bias report to his superior, a report on which the Government initially based its statement (Joint Commission of Inquiry, 2020, p. 3).

Concerning accuracy, the government's spokespersons provided accurate information about the Limbe shipwreck but failed to do so in the Ngarbuh incident.

#### **4.4. Consistency of the Government's Spokespersons in Both Incidents**

The findings reveal that the government's spokespersons for both incidents maintained consistency throughout their initial communication. There were no major discrepancies in their messages. In the case of the Limbe shipwreck, the spokespersons provided similar information as to the number of passengers rescued and the casualties recorded. Their updates on the number of people who boarded the ship were also consistent. They unanimously indicated that the cause of the shipwreck was unknown and would be communicated as soon as the investigations were concluded.

*"The Governor said three corpses were recovered immediately after the incident, with 14 others removed later"* (Kalla, 2019, para. 1) of Voice of Nature (VON) paraphrased the Governor.

*"We rescued 107 people, and unfortunately we recovered three corpses on the spot"* (Xinhua, 2019, para. 2), cited Lieutenant-Colonel Emmanuel Sone of the Cameroon Navy.

*“Colonel Belinga Henri Ludwig, Controller General Inspector of the Rapid Intervention Unit (BIR) and Commander of the Coast reached on the phone confirmed 107 rescued by mid-day yesterday 26 August 2019” (Nkeze, 2019) of Cameroon Tribune paraphrased the Colonel.*

*Two main spokespersons commented on the number of persons on board the ship:*

*“Only 90 of the supposed 132 passengers were officially recorded in the manifest” (Nkeze, 2019, para. 1) reported Cameroon Tribune citing information from the crisis meeting that held on August 27 between the Governor and relevant stakeholders.*

*“On her part, the South West Regional Delegate of Transport, Limunga Kange Epse Kedze, disclosed that the ship which left neighbouring Nigeria and was heading to the Tiko wharf in Cameroon’s South West region had on board over 132 persons” (Kalla, 2019, para. 3) reported on VON.*

*“...the South West Regional Delegate of Transport, Limunga Kange epse Kedze suggests that the vessel which left Calabar was heading to the Tiko Wharf with no fewer than 132 persons when the accident occurred” (Azohnwi, 2019, para. 4) reported on Cameroon-info.net.*

Concerning the Ngarbuh incident, all three spokespersons unanimously told Cameroonians that the government’s security forces were not responsible for the killings. They considered the allegation of military involvement as fake. The Cameroon Government officials equally spoke the same voice regarding the number of persons killed – indicating that seven separatist fighters and five civilians, including one woman and four children were confirmed dead. Also, the officials mentioned in their separate releases that six security officers embarked on the liberation of Ngarbuh from separatists’ bondage. Thus, besides the date of the incident where there were slight differences, the Cameroon Government was consistent in its initial crisis communication of the Ngarbuh incident.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The Cameroon Government spokespersons were consistent in their communications following the two incidents. They spoke with no major discrepancies, reflecting Barton’s (2001) viewpoint of consistency in crises where he asserts that a crisis spokesperson should speak with one voice during a crisis, irrespective of whether there is more than one spokesperson. The Government’s spokespersons also avoided the “no-comment” phrase in reacting to the two incidents. Their decision not to use the phrase aligns with the recommendation of Kempner (1995) in Coombs (2009, p. 104) where he explains that “when a spokesperson says, ‘no comment’, the stakeholders hear ‘I am guilty and trying to hide something’”. Likewise, Schenck (2012) agrees that using ‘no-comment’ when asked a question in crisis times equals being interpreted as ‘guilty as charged’. The ‘no comment’ phrase also suggests “a lack of candour, conveys a sense of secrecy and connotes that you know something that you are either not willing or not allowed to share with the public, creating scepticism and mistrust” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Communicating in a Crisis, 2019, p. 6). Despite being faced with incriminating reports about their involvement in the Ngarbuh incident, The Cameroon Government spokespersons in their press releases and during the press briefings after the incident, did well not to respond with “no comment”.

The government was equally quick to react to the Limbe shipwreck within 24 hours after the incident, and was fast enough to tell its story, thereby positioning herself as an information source. The shipwreck happened on a Sunday (an official holiday in Cameroon) and by Monday, there was a response. Contrarily, the Ngarbuh incident happened on a Thursday (an official working day in Cameroon) but there was no reaction on Friday and Saturday (official working days in Cameroon) until Monday when the Minister Delegate in charge of Defense, Joseph Beti Assomo issued a statement. The Cameroon Government’s tardy reaction in the case of the Ngarbuh incident went against the principle of promptness in initial crisis communication. When a crisis occurs, people want to know what happened (Carney & Jordan, 1993). A quick response in a crisis tells people that the Government is in control of the situation. It enables the Government to tell its side of the story and positions her as the key source of information. When the organisation in crisis maintains sealed lips, it creates what experts have termed an information vacuum. The news media often fills this void and positions itself as the key source of information. Coombs (2009) also enunciates that when an organisation is also not quick in getting its message out, it gives room for others to tell the story of a crisis, in a way that might often paint the

organisation black, as their story can either be inaccurate or negatively framed. Burton-Jeangors elucidates that “early and intensive communication is associated with the necessity to counter rumours, alternative views and potential panic” (Burton-Jeangors, 2019, p. 115). By the time the Cameroon Government made a statement 04days later, it was reacting first to what others had said, before presenting the facts of what happened.

The findings also revealed that the government’s spokespersons were accurate in the case of the Limbe shipwreck, but inaccurate in the case of the Ngarbuh incident. In the Limbe shipwreck, the spokespersons avoided speculations and were cautious. They made the population understand that certain information such as the cause of the incident was unavailable, but investigations were ongoing to discover them. Contrarily, the spokespersons in the Ngarbuh incident made inaccurate statements such as refuting the involvement of the government’s soldiers in the incident. The Joint Commission of Inquiry, which was created to shed light on the incident, attributed the cause of the killings to the National Defence and Security Forces. As such, the spokespersons failed to implement Comfort’s (2006) and Coombs’ (2007) recommendations for initial crisis communication. Comfort (2006) recommends that crisis communication should be more flexible and credible than any form of communication. Coombs (2007) also affirms that there is no room for inaccurate or misleading information during crises. This is because delay, negligence, misinformation or disinformation can fuel the flames of an existing crisis. Truth, openness and transparency are essential core values to be respected during crises. Furthermore, López-Quesada (2017) strongly suggests as a final recommendation that organisations should not lie, as everything eventually comes out in a crisis situation. This was evident in Ngarbuh as the commission report revealed more facts as to what had earlier happened.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The overall findings of the research indicate that the government avoided “no-comment” in the Limbe shipwreck, and was quick, accurate and consistent in her initial crisis communication. In the case of the Ngarbuh incident, the government’s spokespersons also avoided “no-comment” and were consistent, but they failed to be quick and accurate. The government’s first reaction to the incident came after 96 hours, yet, contained erroneous information.

This research recommends that the government should be quick in all its initial crisis communication, that is, communicate within twenty-four hours after the occurrence of any crisis that involves her. Delays in communication intensify the spread of rumours and disinformation, which can further amplify the damage caused by a crisis. It should be noted that being quick does not mean they have all the facts. The Cameroon government can make a statement to show that they are aware of the incident and are investigating the situation. This prescription does not incriminate the government, rather, it helps keep the public abreast on the incident and contributes to mitigating the spread of false information. It also positions the Cameroon Government as a key information source.

Equally, the government should regularly update the Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and Crisis Management Team (CMT). Regularly updating communication plans helps the government to be proactive and respond promptly to crises. Equally, the Cameroon Government should endeavour to cross-check the information provided by informants before press briefings. One of the ways to cross-check informant’s information is to contact those directly affected by a crisis such as the victims. After this, the government should corroborate the information provided by its informants and victims to know if the information aligns. This would help the Cameroon Government to be accurate in its initial response to a crisis.

The main limitation of this study is the absence of primary data from government spokespersons about the Limbe shipwreck and Ngarbuh incidents. Such first-hand data would have substantiated the findings.

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**Citation:** Neville N. Mesumbe et al. "Government Initial Communication in Times of Crisis: A Comparative Study of the Limbe Shipwreck and the Ngarbuh Incidents in Cameroon". *International Journal of Media, Journalism and Mass Communications (IJMJMC)*, vol 11, no. 1, 2025, pp. 24-37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-9479.1101003>

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