TORTURE AND DETENTION IN CAMEROON
The dark side of the US-backed war against Boko Haram

By using architecture as material evidence as well as architectural tools to unveil facts that can be presented publicly, Forensic Architecture has turned disciplinary knowledge into a liberation device. For if public truth is technologically, architecturally, and aesthetically produced in the service of power, then the knowledge for unveiling such constructs sets a path towards freedom through architecture. In the end, only truth will set us free.

The necessity for Forensic Architecture as a practice emerges from the fact that contemporary conflicts increasingly take place within urban areas, with crucial evidence now being generated on an unprecedented scale by both civilians and participants in conflict and shared widely across social and mainstream platforms. While architecture turns the attention of forensics to buildings, details, cities, and landscapes, forensics turns architecture into an investigative practice, and demands that architects pay close attention to the materiality of the built environment and its representation through data and media.

Grounded in the use of architecture as a methodological and analytic device with which to investigate armed conflicts, environmental destruction
1 Mapa de Fotokol, la escuela ocupada por las fuerzas militares de Camerún, que muestra cómo soldados y detenidos comparten instalaciones que también se utilizan activamente como aulas. La ocupación de escuelas por parte de las fuerzas armadas las convierte en objetivos militares y pone en riesgo la vida de los niños. / A map of Fotokol, a school occupied by Cameroonian military forces, showing where soldiers and detainees share buildings that are also actively used as classrooms. The occupation of schools by armed forces turns them into military targets and puts the lives of children at risk. © Forensic Architecture, 2017

2 Mapa de Salak, un cuartel general militar regional, donde los detenidos son ilegalmente retenidos en condiciones inhumanas y torturados de forma rutinaria. A partir de la localización de las fotos tomadas por ellos, se ha podido determinar la proximidad del personal de los ee.uu. a los lugares donde ocurren torturas y detenciones. / A map of Salak, a regional military headquarters, where detainees are held illegally in inhumane conditions and tortured routinely. From the location of the photos taken by them, it has been possible to determine the proximity of us personnel to the locations where torture and detention occur. © Forensic Architecture, 2017
and other political struggles, Forensic Architecture’s new forms of investigation cross-reference multiple evidence sources by employing spatial and material analysis, remote sensing, mapping and reconstruction, and extend outwards to overlay elements of witness testimony and the cumulative forms of visual documentation enabled by contemporary media. Through a detailed and critical investigations, Forensic Architecture presents how public truth is produced – technologically, architecturally, and aesthetically – and how it can be used to confront authority and to expose new forms of state-led violence.

Since 2014, Cameroon has been at war with Boko Haram, an armed extremist group responsible for thousands of murders and abductions across the Lake Chad Basin.

Trained and supported by us and European governments, and armed by Israeli private companies, the Cameroonian security forces act with increasing impunity against civilians in the country’s Far North region. Between 2015 and 2016, Amnesty International collected evidence of over a hundred cases of illegal detention, torture and extra-judicial killing of Cameroonian citizens accused of supporting or being a member of Boko Haram, at around twenty sites across the country.

Using testimony and information supplied by Amnesty International, Forensic Architecture reconstructed two of these facilities – a regional military headquarters, and an occupied school –
Using witness testimony and hand drawn plans like the one pictured, we confirmed that detainees were routinely tortured and interrogated at Salak in the building known as the 'dgre'.

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En Salak, los detenidos eran retenidos en celdas oscuras y hacinadas que contenían de 40 a 50 personas en condiciones degradantes, sin suficiente acceso a alimentos o agua. / Detainees were held at Salak in dark, overcrowded cells containing 40-50 people kept in degrading conditions with little access to food or water.

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in order to confirm and illustrate the conditions of incarceration and torture described by former detainees. At the two sites, detainees were kept in degrading and inhumane conditions in dark, crowded, airless cells. All were fed poorly, and most were tortured routinely. Dozens of detainees report witnessing deaths at the hands of Cameroon’s elite military unit, the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), or the Cameroonian intelligence agency, the DGRE.

Forensic Architecture’s research also uncovered the presence of USA personnel – military and private contractors – at one of the sites. Using satellite imagery, open-source material, and images gathered from social media, Forensic Architecture demonstrated the proximity of those personnel to sites of incarceration and torture, raising troubling questions for continued American support of Cameroon’s security forces. ARQ
Forensic Architecture is a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, consisting of architects, artists, filmmakers, journalist, software developers, scientists, lawyers, and an extended network of collaborators from a wide variety of fields and disciplines. Founded in 2010 by Eyal Weizman, Forensic Architecture is committed to the development and dissemination of new evidentiary techniques and undertakes advanced architectural and media investigations on behalf of international prosecutors, human rights and civil society groups, as well as political and environmental justice organisations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, B’tselem, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and the UN, among others.