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2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cameroon

CAMEROON: Tier 2 Watch List

The Government of Cameroon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included investigating more trafficking cases as well as identifying significantly more potential victims than the previous reporting period. Cameroon's anti-trafficking inter-ministerial committee (IMC) met more frequently, and the government continued its awareness-raising activities. Further, the government developed and partially implemented a one-year national action plan to enhance the country's anti-trafficking efforts. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity. Authorities did not report investigating allegations of security forces recruiting and using child soldiers in 2019, or during the reporting period, or allegations military officials sexually exploited women. Additionally, the government has not taken any action in response to multiple reports of diplomats exploiting individuals in forced labor. Officials did not widely disseminate standard operating procedures on victim identification and referral to law enforcement or first responders and did not pass draft anti-trafficking legislation from 2012 that conforms to international law. Therefore Cameroon remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the second consecutive year.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Investigate allegations of trafficking against complicit officials—including security forces and diplomats—and prosecute cases transparently while respecting due process. • Disseminate and train law enforcement and civil society on the National Referral System and Standard Operating Procedures (NRS/SOP) on victim identification and referral to increase first responders' ability to identify internal trafficking cases proactively, as well as cross-border trafficking as distinct from smuggling. • Amend the anti-trafficking law to remove the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion for child sex trafficking offenses and to make a clear distinction between trafficking and smuggling. • Expand training for law enforcement, judicial officials, and social workers on the anti-trafficking section of the penal code to increase the effectiveness of investigations and prosecutions while respecting the rule of law and human rights; and administer sufficiently stringent sentences to those convicted. • Increase formal collaboration with NGOs on proactively identifying and protecting victims. • Provide counseling, legal support, protection against intimidation, and other necessary assistance to victims to encourage and support their cooperation with law enforcement. • Provide financial and human resources to the IMC, and regularly convene the committee in coordination with NGOs and international organizations. • Publicize information to citizens on their rights as foreign workers and sources of assistance while abroad. • Investigate labor recruiters and agencies suspected of fraudulent recruitment—including unlicensed recruiters and intermediaries—and prosecute those complicit in trafficking.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained its overall anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law criminalized some forms of sex trafficking and all forms of labor trafficking. Inconsistent with international law, Cameroon's legal framework required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offense, and therefore did not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The law prescribed penalties of 10 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 to 1 million Central African francs (CFA) (\$94-\$1,890), which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to some forms of sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. If the trafficking offense involved a victim who was 15 years old or younger, the penalties increased to 15 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 to 10 million CFA (\$189 to \$18,890). The law prescribed separate penalties for debt bondage, which ranged from five to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 to 500,000 CFA (\$19-\$945) and were also sufficiently stringent. The law was published in French and English, the two official languages of the government. The English version conflated trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling offenses by referring to trafficking in persons offenses, as defined under international law, as "slavery in

persons,” while referring to smuggling-related offenses as “trafficking in persons.” Increasing the potential for conflating smuggling and trafficking in persons, Article 342 of Cameroon’s 2016 Penal Code prohibited both “trafficking in persons” and “slavery in persons.” Legislation drafted in 2012 to address victim and witness protection and correct inconsistencies with international law remained pending for the ninth consecutive year.

The government did not provide comprehensive law enforcement statistics, but officials reported investigating 205 potential human trafficking cases between January and August 2020; referring 62 cases (30 forced labor and 32 sexual exploitation) to courts for prosecution; and prosecuting four suspects potentially for forced labor. In the entirety of 2019, the government reported investigating nine potential trafficking cases and prosecuting seven suspected traffickers. Officials reported convicting at least two traffickers between April and August 2020 and sentencing them to life and 15 years’ imprisonment, compared with convicting five traffickers in 2019. According to observers, courts likely prosecuted and convicted additional traffickers during the reporting period, despite the lack of government reporting.

Separate from the aforementioned potential cases, in February 2021, gendarmerie in the Southwest city of Limbe arrested seven suspects accused of exploiting 29 children between the ages of seven and 14 in domestic servitude after promising their parents to provide the children an education. Media reported the suspects were preparing to transfer the children to Nigeria before law enforcement officers intervened. Judicial officials charged all seven of the accused under the country’s 2005 child trafficking law related to the fight against child trafficking and slavery, and the five suspected accomplices under penal code article 292 in addition to the child trafficking law. As of March 2021, the prosecution was ongoing.

Corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns. Officials did not report the outcome of an investigation into a complicit official that was opened in 2018. Authorities did not report investigating two allegations of child soldier recruitment and use from 2019 and 2020. Additionally, the government did not disclose efforts to investigate allegations of government security forces sexually exploiting women in the Southwest Region or soldiers from the 42nd Motorized Infantry Battalion who NGOs reported forcibly recruited community members in the Far North Region to stand watch against Boko Haram incursions during the rating period.

Ongoing insecurity in the Far North Region as well as armed conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions between the government and Anglophone separatists hindered the government’s law enforcement efforts due to the closure of courts and lack of official access in some areas. Some regional courts and NGOs encouraged victims to settle trafficking cases outside of court in part because of insufficient cooperation between the government and NGOs and weak judicial administration.

The government did not disclose implementing or widely disseminating its standard operating procedures on victim identification and referral to law enforcement or first responders. Over the course of the reporting period, the General Delegation for National Security reported conducting anti-trafficking training for an unknown number of police, compared with the government holding six seminars and sending two officers abroad for training in 2019. Additionally, officials coordinated with NGOs and a partner government to conduct a training on identifying and assisting trafficking victims in January 2021. Because many law enforcement and judicial officials lacked knowledge of the crime, they may have tried some trafficking crimes as child abuse or kidnapping, which carried lesser penalties.

PROTECTION

The government increased efforts to identify victims and protect them. Although the government did not maintain comprehensive statistics, officials reported identifying at least 752 potential victims from January to August 2020, compared with identifying 77 potential victims over the course of the entire previous calendar year. Observers noted the increase in potential victims identified may be attributed to increased sensitization efforts by the government and NGOs but may include some cases of migrant smuggling. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) stated its officials provided basic assistance, psychological support, health care, as well as reintegration services for all 752 potential victims at five MINAS-run social centers in Yaoundé and Douala, with MINAS providing some individuals livelihoods training at the Betamba Childhood Institute in the country’s Center region.

Additionally, between April and June 2020, MINAS reported identifying 162 homeless children vulnerable to trafficking and providing them shelter, food, and psychological support in government-supported social centers in Yaoundé. MINAS reported identifying 1,147 vulnerable homeless children throughout Cameroon in 2019; the pandemic’s effects on government revenue and operations negatively impacted many anti-trafficking efforts related to protection. Of the 162 children, officials reunited 78 with their families, referred 40 to an education center to help them develop vocational skills to limit their future vulnerability, and continued to provide services to 27 as of June 2020. In February 2021, gendarmerie identified 29 child victims of forced labor (separate from the 752 potential victims previously referenced) in collaboration with civil society; the court directed authorities to return the children to their parents following a hearing in March.

NGOs reported thousands of Cameroonian workers remained in Middle Eastern countries, many of whom were at risk of exploitation in domestic servitude or sex trafficking. For the second consecutive year, officials did not share the number of trafficking victims Cameroon repatriated from the Maghreb and Middle East.

MINAS partnered with an international organization in July to update and disseminate the NRS/SOP to guide officials in proactive identification and referral of trafficking victims, initially developed in 2013. The National Gendarmerie reported it developed a strategy to detect trafficking victims and smuggled migrants proactively as a prerequisite to begin an investigation; however, observers stated authorities did not disseminate the NRS/SOPs widely during the reporting period.

MINAS had the authority to admit children subjected to abuse—including trafficking victims—to government institutions for vulnerable children, which offered shelter, food, medical as well as psychological care, education, vocational training, and family tracing. Private centers funded by NGOs and regulated by MINAS provided care for an unknown number of child victims.

The government did not have a formal policy to encourage victims to participate in investigations or prosecutions of their traffickers and did not report providing counseling, legal support, or any other assistance to victims who testified during court proceedings. The government did not report providing protection for victims cooperating with trafficking investigations despite experts claiming trafficking networks threatened victims during their trials. While there were no reports the government penalized trafficking victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, authorities may have detained or deported some unidentified victims due to the limited use of the NRS/SOP and understanding of the crime among officials. The government could grant temporary residency status to foreign victims who, if deported, may face hardship or retribution; however, it did not report providing this accommodation during the reporting period.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts. Officials finalized a one-year national action plan in October focusing on six principles: prevention through awareness raising and capacity building; socio-economic reintegration of victims; punishment for traffickers; development of statistical capacity; inter-ministerial and multi-sectoral cooperation; and coordination of anti-trafficking efforts. The government implemented some aspects of the plan. The IMC convened at least four times in 2020 compared to twice in 2019 and underwent two leadership transitions during the reporting period. Cameroon dedicated human resources to joining the Alliance 8.7 initiative as a Pathfinder country, a global partnership aimed at ending human trafficking through multi-stakeholder collaboration.

During the reporting period, MINAS continued its public awareness campaign directed towards the general public and vulnerable children to inform Cameroonians on trafficking indicators. Officials did not report the number of individuals reached, compared with approximately 397,000 Cameroonians in 2019. The government partnered with an international organization in 2020 to implement awareness raising activities in four cities focused on informing vulnerable families on the risks of child exploitation; however, pandemic restrictions on in-person gatherings hindered many planned sensitization efforts. Authorities reported a hotline developed in 2020 and implemented under the NRS/SOP received approximately 10-15 trafficking-related calls every four months; however, officials did not disclose whether these calls led to investigations or victims identified.

NGOs stated police and immigration officials' screening efforts at Douala's international airport prevented some potential victims from traveling to the Middle East as a result of human trafficking schemes; however, the government's enforcement efforts diverted some vulnerable job seekers to Lagos, Nigeria where screening procedures were less stringent. The Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP), in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, monitored formal labor recruiters but did not report the number of illicit labor recruitment offices it determined to be engaged in fraudulent recruitment and closed. During the previous year, officials denied the accreditation of 10 labor recruitment firms for violations potentially related to trafficking, issued warnings to 16 temporary employment placement firms suspected of human trafficking, and suspended nine firms for trafficking-related concerns. MINEFOP officials reported publishing a list of licensed recruitment agencies annually, although the scope of dissemination was limited. MINEFOP reported it does not have a system to prevent traffickers from exploiting workers once agencies placed them in overseas employment. Increasing their vulnerability to trafficking, Cameroonians frequently used unauthorized recruiters to seek employment abroad. Observers noted there was anecdotal evidence border officials began requiring parental authorization for unaccompanied children in 2020; however, the government did not report whether it identified any children through these screening efforts.

The lack of birth certificates remained a factor increasing the vulnerability of individuals to exploitation, with only 40 percent of children registered in Cameroon. In November, National Assembly members and ministers convened to develop mitigating strategies to increase key communities' access to birth certificates. Officials highlighted the need for civil registrars to visit

health facilities to register births proactively, as well as the need to increase computerization of birth records. At the end of the reporting period, the government did not report implementing these recommendations.

Ministry of External Relations officials stated they delivered training and sensitization programming to diplomats but did not report how many officials they reached. Between 2015 and 2017, a Cameroonian diplomat posted in the United States allegedly engaged in visa fraud related to a child female domestic worker. Because of diplomatic immunity, the United States could not commence prosecution, nor did the government report taking any action during the reporting period to hold the diplomat accountable. The diplomat left the United States in 2018. Additionally, between 2017 and 2019, a different Cameroonian diplomat posted in the United States engaged in alleged violations of the TVPA, as well as federal and state labor laws. Because of diplomatic immunity, the United States could not commence prosecution, nor did the government report taking any action during the reporting period to hold the diplomat accountable. The official left the United States in 2021. In November, the government coordinated with an international organization to obtain human rights training for 14 Rapid Intervention Battalion officers that included sessions on victim protection and sexual violence. The government did not report providing anti-trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Cameroon, and traffickers exploit victims from Cameroon abroad. Pandemic-related border closures likely reduced the scale of transnational exploitation, according to experts. However, the economic impacts of the pandemic combined with ongoing violence in the Northwest and Southwest regions contributed to a sharp increase in the number of victims exploited domestically. Government officials, NGO representatives, and media outlets stated the conflict increased the risk of human trafficking during the reporting period due to the more than one million displaced individuals, diminished police and judicial presence, as well as deteriorated economic and educational conditions. The four years of school closures stemming from the conflict have resulted in some parents sending their children to stay with intermediaries who, instead of providing education and safety, exploit the children in domestic servitude.

Child traffickers often use the promise of education or a better life in urban areas to convince rural parents to entrust their children to intermediaries, who then exploit the children in sex trafficking or forced labor; parents may play an active role early in the process due to their desire to remove their children from areas impacted by conflict. Criminals coerce women, IDPs, homeless children, and orphans into sex trafficking and forced labor throughout the country. Some labor recruiters lure children and adolescents from economically disadvantaged families to cities with the prospect of employment and then subject victims to labor or sex trafficking. Traffickers exploit Cameroonian children in domestic service and restaurants, as well as begging or vending on streets and highways. Additionally, criminal elements force Cameroonian children to work in artisanal gold mining, gravel quarries, fishing, animal breeding, and agriculture (on onion, cotton, tea, and cocoa plantations), as well as in urban transportation assisting bus drivers and in construction to run errands, work, or provide security. Media reporting indicates exploitation in Cameroon's fishing sector is widespread.

Observers note pandemic travel restrictions likely decreased child sex tourism in 2020; past reports highlighted Kribi and Douala as two centers of the crime, primarily perpetrated by nationals of Belgium, Chad, France, Germany, Nigeria, Switzerland, and Uganda. Criminals exploited Cameroonians in forced labor and sex trafficking in the Bonaberi neighborhood in Douala – which hosts hundreds of IDPs, according to NGOs. In December 2020, observers alleged 30 cases of debt bondage in the Ndop subdivision of the Northwest Region.

Foreign business owners and herders force children from neighboring countries including Benin, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria to labor in spare parts shops or cattle grazing in northern Cameroon; many traffickers share the nationality of their victims. The number of children traffickers exploit as they transit the country en route to Gabon and Equatorial Guinea decreased due to border closures related to the pandemic. Experts reported Turkish and Chinese officials in Cameroon may facilitate transnational human trafficking by granting visas to Africans with little oversight. Cameroonian banks may have assisted criminal networks involved in fraudulent recruitment by validating income and employment oversight requirements, as well as opening “ghost” bank accounts for victims to demonstrate false income levels.

Observers reported there were more than one million IDPs in Cameroon at the end of 2020, an increase from 977,000 in 2019. In addition to IDPs, there were approximately 435,000 refugees in the country as of November 30, 2020. Traffickers may prey on both IDPs and refugees due to their economic instability and sometimes-limited access to formal justice. Boko Haram's activities on the border with Nigeria continued to displace many of these refugees. There continued to be reports of hereditary slavery in northern chiefdoms.

An NGO reported a 17-year-old boy claimed soldiers from the 42nd Motorized Infantry Battalion attempted to coerce him into guard duty in the Far North Region, and soldiers from the same unit forcibly recruited other community members in the city of Mozogo to stand watch against Boko Haram incursions. Additionally, observers reported government security forces engaged in commercial sex with women in the Southwest Region divisions of Ndian, Buea, Ekona, and Muyuka, using food insecurity and their authority as leverage. Some community neighborhood watch groups, known as vigilance committees, may also use and recruit children in operations against Boko Haram and separatists, although there is no evidence of the government providing material support to these specific groups. Boko Haram is a consistent terrorist threat, and continues to forcibly recruit Cameroonian children as porters, cooks, and scouts. The terrorist organization also uses women and girls as forced suicide bombers as well as sex slaves, and boys and girls as child soldiers. An international organization reported non-state armed groups abducted 26 children and forced seven to commit suicide bombings in July 2020. Anglophone separatists recruited and used child soldiers in the Southwest and Northwest Regions, both for fighting government forces and for gathering intelligence, according to observers.

Traffickers exploit Cameroonians from disadvantaged social strata, in particular from rural areas, in forced labor and sex trafficking in the Middle East (especially Kuwait and Lebanon), Thailand, as well as in Europe (including Switzerland and Cyprus), the United States, and multiple African countries (including Benin and Nigeria). Most Cameroonians exploited abroad are between the ages of 20 and 38, and come from the Northwest, Southwest, Littoral, Center, South, and West Regions. Fraudulent labor brokers recruit some Cameroonian women for domestic work in the Middle East, where traffickers exploit them in sex trafficking or domestic servitude. Pandemic border closures reduced but did not eliminate the risk that criminals exploit some economic migrants in search of opportunity in Libya, or while in transit through Niger. NGOs reported Nigerians in the eastern states of that country exploited Cameroonian refugees displaced by the Anglophone conflict in forced labor and sex trafficking.

Trafficking networks generally consist of local community members, including religious leaders and trafficking victims who have become perpetrators. These networks advertise jobs through the internet, as well as other media, and recruit and sell other Cameroonians directly to families in need of domestic workers. Advocates working on trafficking issues report the government's awareness-raising activities targeting fraudulent recruitment have raised awareness among vulnerable populations, but have caused intermediaries to operate with greater discretion, often directing victims to travel to the Middle East through neighboring countries, including Nigeria. International organizations, NGOs, and migrants report Cameroonian trafficking networks in Morocco coerce women into sex trafficking.

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