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2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Cameroon during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious abuses in a conflict, including reportedly unlawful or widespread civilian deaths or harm, enforced disappearances or abductions, torture, and physical abuses; unlawful recruitment or use of children in armed conflict by nonstate groups; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; restrictions on freedom of movement within the territory of a state; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child, early and forced marriage, and other forms of such violence; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of ethnic groups and Indigenous peoples; laws criminalizing same-sex sexual conduct between adults, which were enforced; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association, including violence and threats against labor activists.

The government took limited credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Armed separatists, Boko Haram, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-West Africa, criminal gangs, and other societal abusers committed significant human rights abuses, some of which were investigated by the government.

Section 1.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

A. ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIFE AND OTHER UNLAWFUL OR POLITICALLY MOTIVATED KILLINGS

There were numerous reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary and unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

On February 27 in Moussourouk in Mayo-Kani Department of the Far North Region, an off-duty Rapid Intervention Battalion soldier, Woukam Baba, stabbed to death Etienne Ayang Kolfounq, a high school teacher from a local government school, after a verbal altercation at a drinking spot. The Ministry of Defense confirmed the killing and announced Woukam was arrested, as were two

other soldiers present during the altercation. According to the governmental Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC), the three soldiers were incarcerated awaiting trial for homicide.

On March 15, University of Buea student Ngule Linus Fonteh died in police custody after he and his roommate, Mboh Jires Akua, were apprehended by nonuniformed members of the Military Security Unit for allegedly supporting armed separatist groups. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa and a lawyer for the victim's family, Mboh suspected he may have been targeted because of critical statements he made online regarding the security forces and that Ngule was detained arbitrarily because he was Mboh's roommate. Mboh reported he and Ngule were both tortured with machetes after initially refusing to sign prewritten confessions. Mboh stated he was beaten and received several blows with machetes on the soles of his feet during an interrogation. When the morgue released Ngule's remains after four months, his body reportedly showed signs of torture, including scars on his feet. Security forces detained Mboh for nearly four months until, after a CHRC investigation, he was released without charges. There were no known reports of government action against the perpetrators.

Four soldiers of the 31st Motorized Infantry Battalion based in Tchollire, North Region, shot and killed Souleymanou Bouba in April 2022. According to the CHRC, the four soldiers were detained in June 2022 and subsequently charged with homicide but released on bail. The case remained pending at year's end.

Journalists and NGOs reported numerous arbitrary and unlawful killings of civilians by nonstate armed groups in conflicts that continued in the Northwest, Southwest, and Far North Regions.

Boko Haram and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-West Africa (ISIS-WA) reportedly committed unlawful killings of unarmed civilians. On February 3, four persons, including three women, died in an attack attributed to Boko Haram and ISIS-WA in Metchikar Village on the border with Nigeria in the Far North Region. According to media, on March 3, heavily armed Boko Haram and ISIS-WA terrorists attacked the locality of Assighassia in Mayo-Moskota Subdivision of the Far North Region, killing three civilians in their homes.

B. DISAPPEARANCE

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities during the year.

C. TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN, OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT, AND OTHER RELATED ABUSES

Although the constitution and law prohibited such practices, anecdotal reports and survivor testimony suggested government officials employed them.

Human rights NGOs documented at least one case in which traditional authorities severely abused civilians. In the North Region, bodyguards of traditional leader Lamido of Tcheboa detained Woulvang (no last names) following a dispute. The bodyguards reportedly administered 120 lashes and held Woulvang in a cell without food and water for 72 hours. The CHRC found the allegations credible, but the office of the local prosecutor claimed it had insufficient evidence to file charges.

There were reports lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons were beaten and physically abused by ordinary citizens, with little or no action by the government to protect them or pursue their attackers.

The government took steps to identify, prosecute, and punish some abusive officials, but such action was not consistent. Outcomes of such procedures were rarely disclosed to the public. Impunity remained a serious problem, particularly within the armed forces and police.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical abuse, inadequate sanitary conditions, and a lack of medical care.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Severe overcrowding remained a significant problem in most prisons, especially in urban centers. Although the country's dilapidated, colonial-era prisons had a designed capacity of 19,415 persons, the government reported in June 2022 they held 32,003 inmates. Conditions in detention cells located at gendarmerie and police stations were often worse. Officials made extensive use of shackling as a disciplinary measure.

Lack of access to food, potable water, medical care, sanitation, heating, ventilation, and lighting was life threatening. Inmates suffered from malnutrition and were exposed to numerous communicable diseases. Several cases of cholera were reported at the Kondengui central prison in Yaoundé, with at least three deaths in May. Prisoner-on-prisoner violence occurred during the year.

Administration: Authorities reportedly did not address all credible allegations of mistreatment.

Independent Monitoring: Independent monitoring of prisons was inconsistent. NGOs and lawyers reported prison access was significantly curtailed during the year. The government did not readily allow independent human rights groups access to review prison conditions, and groups reported prison access depended greatly on relationships between group leaders and prison officials. Organizations that implemented government-approved projects in prisons reportedly had easier access.

D. ARBITRARY ARREST OR DETENTION

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of persons to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court and receive compensation for serious injuries resulting from illegal detention. The government did not always respect these provisions.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law required police to obtain a warrant from a judge or prosecutor and to disclose their identity and state the reason for the arrest prior to apprehending a suspect, except when a person was caught in the act of committing a crime. Police often did not respect these requirements. The law provided that suspects be brought promptly before a judge or prosecutor, although this often did not occur, and citizens were detained without judicial authorization. The law allowed police to legally detain a person in connection with a common crime without charges for up to 48 hours, which could be extended up to 96 additional hours upon written approval of state counsel. The law provided that a terror suspect could be held indefinitely in investigative detention with the authorization of the prosecutor. Administrative authorities, such as governors and civilian government officials serving in territorial command, also could approve detentions of individuals without charge for renewable periods of 15 days. Police and gendarmes reportedly often exceeded prescribed detention periods.

The law allowed access to legal counsel and family members, although police frequently denied detainees access to both. The law prohibited incommunicado detention, but such cases reportedly occurred, especially in connection with those accused of being or supporting separatists in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. The law permitted bail, but bail was approved only on a selective basis. The law provided for the right to sue for unlawful arrest, but this right was seldom respected.

Arbitrary Arrest: Police, gendarmes, military officials, and other government authorities reportedly arrested and detained persons arbitrarily, often holding them for prolonged periods without charge or trial and at times incommunicado.

According to the NGO Mandela Center International, on February 12 authorities in Ekona, Fako Division, arrested 97 persons as suspected terrorists, 81 of whom were released two days later after women protested in Buea. On March 2, the Mandela Center reported members of defense and security forces arrested 160 civilians in five villages of the Mbonge and Konye Subdivisions, Meme Division, of the Southwest Region. A military magistrate charged 14 of them with terrorism, manufacture of weapons, and undermining state security. The other 146 detainees were released without charge at different times, from one week to one month after their initial detention.

Pretrial Detention: The law provided for a maximum of 18 months' detention before trial, but many detainees waited years to appear in court. Factors contributing to lengthy pretrial detentions included insufficient court staff, mismanagement of case files, inability to pay court fees, and the politicization of some legal proceedings that required direction from the central government.

E. DENIAL OF FAIR PUBLIC TRIAL

The constitution and law provided for an independent judiciary, but the government did not always respect judicial independence and impartiality. In some instances, the outcomes of trials appeared influenced by the government, especially in politically sensitive cases. Despite the judiciary's nominal independence from the executive and legislative branches, the president appointed all members of the bench and the legal department of the judicial branch, including the president of the Supreme Court, and could dismiss them at will.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provided for the right to a fair and public trial without undue delay, and defendants were presumed innocent. Authorities did not always respect these provisions and applied the presumption of innocence in a selective manner. Criminal defendants had the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges against them, with free assistance of an interpreter if needed; the quality of interpretation often was poor. Defendants had the right to be present and to consult with an attorney of their choice, but in many cases the government did not respect this right, restricting access to lawyers, often at the preliminary investigation phase, particularly in cases of individuals suspected of complicity with separatists or political opponents. When defendants could not pay for their own legal defense, the court could appoint trial counsel at public expense, but the process was often burdensome and lengthy, and the quality of legal assistance was often poor. Authorities generally allowed defendants to question witnesses and to present witnesses and evidence on their own behalf but did not compel witnesses to testify. Defendants had the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense and not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but authorities often abused these rights. Examining magistrates sometimes attempted to induce political opponents and suspected separatists to incriminate themselves. The law provided for the right to request recusal of judges and to sue for unlawful arrest, but these rights were seldom respected. Applications to recuse judges with conflicts of interest rarely succeeded, especially in politically sensitive cases.

Defendants could appeal convictions up to the Supreme Court and subsequently petition the president for pardon, but there were significant delays in appeals. For example, on November 10 the Court of Appeals of the Far North Region in Maroua overturned a 2015 military court decision and reduced an initial death sentence, imposed by a military judge over the objection of the military prosecutor who had argued for release due to lack of evidence, to a 10-year term of imprisonment. The defendant, a woman, was accused of acts of terrorism based on an anonymous denunciation. According to the defendant's lawyer, no investigation was conducted, no witnesses were heard, and no victims were identified in the case.

Civilian courts also often limited the rights of defendants in politically sensitive cases. Military tribunals were sometimes used against civilians and political opponents, bypassing defendants' procedural rights regarding their detention, prosecution, and appeals.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

Several human rights organizations claimed they had limited access to political prisoners, alleging difficulties in securing authorization from prosecutors. Although a reliable estimate of the number of political prisoners was not available, common purported charges used against government critics reportedly related to the security of the state, including secession, terrorism, rebellion, revolution, and “hostility against the fatherland.” Prison sentences in many such cases went beyond the limits prescribed by law for the relevant offense.

F. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Not applicable.

G. PROPERTY SEIZURE AND RESTITUTION

On May 25, the Littoral Administrative Court ruled that the government’s 2020 appropriation of approximately six acres of land in the Bali-Dikolo area of Douala violated the law. The ruling followed the government’s forcible eviction of several dozen residents from the area in May 2022 as part of a project to build a five-star hotel. Government workers and security forces bulldozed houses and deployed tear gas against protesters. The May 25 ruling called for the reinstatement of the land certificates and associated rights of the affected displaced persons.

H. ARBITRARY OR UNLAWFUL INTERFERENCE WITH PRIVACY, FAMILY, HOME, OR CORRESPONDENCE

Although the constitution and law prohibited such actions, these rights were subject to restriction in the interests of the state, and there were reports police and gendarmes abused their positions by harassing citizens and conducting searches without warrants. The law permitted a police officer to enter a private home during daylight hours without a warrant only if pursuing a person suspected of or seen committing a crime. Police and gendarmes often did not comply with this provision and entered private homes without a warrant. Unconfirmed anecdotal reports indicated the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. In contrast with 2022, there were no reports authorities punished family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives.

I. CONFLICT-RELATED ABUSES

There were reports of abuses associated with continuing conflicts in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, where government forces clashed with separatists. The abuses included killings and abductions by both government forces and armed separatist groups. There were also reports of abuses, including killings and abductions, committed by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA in the Far North Region.

Killings: There were reports government forces and separatist fighters deliberately killed numerous civilians. Although independent observers accused government forces of killing unarmed civilians, officials claimed those killed by government forces in conflict zones were in fact separatists. Separatists also attacked and killed government workers and civilians alleged to have assisted government forces or who did not observe separatist-imposed lockdowns.

According to the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, on June 24 government security forces killed five men in Ekona Town in Muyuka Subdivision of the Southwest Region. Reports differed as to whether the victims were armed at the time. The CHRC claimed the men

were suspected separatists celebrating the birthday of a nonstate armed group leader known as General Sagta, noting they died during a gun battle with soldiers.

According to media reports, on the night of July 15 security forces killed five men in a compound in Bamenda's Awing neighborhood. Media sources differed on whether the men were separatists who were engaged in kidnapping. On July 17, Northwest Region Governor Adolphe Lele Lafrique alleged the deceased men had in fact kidnapped citizens in Awing before transporting them in unidentified cars to Nacho Junction and executing them in public to send a message to other citizens who might consider collaborating with government forces.

Journalists and NGOs reported numerous arbitrary and unlawful killings of civilians by nonstate armed groups. In a July report, Amnesty International reported that on January 12 armed men believed to be separatists killed six individuals in the village of Munkep. The killing was reportedly connected to several months of clashes between Fulani herdsmen and armed separatists concerning land disputes. The traditional chief of Munkep was among the six victims.

On February 10, armed separatists killed five workers of the Cameroon Development Corporation because they worked during a separatist-imposed lockdown ahead of a February 11 government holiday celebration. The Ambazonia Governing Council, an armed separatist group, claimed responsibility for the attack. On February 20 in Bali, Northwest Region, suspected separatists beheaded a teenager whom they accused of revealing separatist hideouts. In one of the largest attacks since the conflict began, on November 6, suspected members of a nonstate armed group entered Egbekaw Village in Manyu Division of the Southwest Region, shot randomly, and set ablaze several houses. In a November 7 statement, the government indicated the preliminary death toll from the attack was 25 persons. The government attributed the attack to a separatist group known as the Manyu Unity Warriors, affiliated with the Ambazonian Defense Forces. Subsequent estimates put the death toll between 40 and 60, making it the single deadliest attack of the seven-year conflict.

Abductions: Armed separatists reportedly abducted several individuals for not respecting separatist-imposed lockdown measures. Separatists held civilians as hostages, including public officials, political leaders, teachers, schoolchildren, and religious and traditional leaders. There were reports abductors physically abused their victims.

On May 19 in Kedjom Keku, Mezam Division of the Northwest Region, armed individuals abducted 30 women for denouncing separatist-imposed lockdowns and taxes. On May 20, the nonstate armed group Ambazonia Defense Forces abducted Stephen Ujambeng, ruling party Councilor for the Northwest Region, along with an unspecified number of other civilians, allegedly for participating in a May 20 national day parade.

According to official sources, on June 1, security forces rescued Fon Yakum Kevin Shumitang II, the president of the Northwest House of Chiefs, who had been abducted by armed separatists in 2021.

In August, the bodies of five government officials abducted in 2021 by separatists were exhumed. The bodies, along with the remains of four other unidentified victims, were discovered in a mass grave outside Ekondo-Titi in the Southwest Region. A former separatist fighter who had been present during the killings informed authorities of the grave location.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to reports, both government agents and separatists physically abused civilians, as well as prisoners in their custody.

Multiple organizations reported Rapid Intervention Battalion soldier Ewome Eboko John, better known by the pseudonym "Moja Moja," continued to abuse with impunity civilians he accused of being separatists in the Southwest Region. In a March video released on social media, Moja Moja could be seen walking on the corpses of two alleged separatists killed in the locality of Muea, Fako Division of the Southwest Region. The posting followed a pattern in which Moja Moja recorded videos of his victims as he abused them and published the videos on his social media accounts. In

June 2022, for example, one of the videos depicted Moja Moja beating an unarmed civilian with a metal object and forcing him to confess to being a separatist fighter. After the video was posted, a group of lawyers wrote a letter to the chief prosecutor of the Yaoundé Military Tribunal, requesting that he take appropriate action against Moja Moja. According to the CHRC, in June the Southwest Region Military Tribunal summoned Moja Moja, but at year's end no known actions were taken against him. CHRC officials noted complaints against Moja Moja were often anonymous because of victims' fears of reprisal, which they claimed made investigation difficult.

Child Soldiers: Observers reported Boko Haram continued to recruit and use child soldiers, including girls, in attacks on civilian and military targets. Some community groups, known as vigilance committees, were reported to use and recruit children in armed operations against Boko Haram and other nonstate armed groups. Separatists in the Southwest and Northwest Regions recruited and used child soldiers in combat roles and to gather intelligence, according to observers.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: As in the previous year, there were reports of violence directed against health workers and of the use of firearms near health facilities by members of security forces and armed separatists. There were also reports of such incidents targeting schools and civilian residential areas.

The UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that on February 5 suspected armed nonstate elements attacked the Ouzal Health Center in Mayo-Tsanaga Division of the far North Region, looting and destroying medical equipment and supplies. The attack was the second suffered by the health facility in a three-week period.

Of the 6,515 schools expected to open during the 2022-23 academic year in the Northwest and Southwest, only 3,013 were operational as of January, with insecurity as the primary reason for this, according to OCHA and echoed in Amnesty International's July report. Nonstate armed groups announced and enforced a lockdown that delayed the start of the 2023-24 academic year in the Northwest and Southwest. The government reported only 35,000 primary students (8 percent) of the estimated 450,000 students in the region reported to classes on the September 4 school year start date. Nonstate armed groups enforced the lockdown with several violent attacks on civilians, including on two elementary school teachers in the Northwest. Schools were not permitted to reopen until September 19, when students gradually returned to school.

Section 2.

Respect for Civil Liberties

A. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, INCLUDING FOR MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND OTHER MEDIA

The law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government often restricted this right, explicitly or implicitly.

Freedom of Expression: Government officials reportedly denied individuals or organizations the ability to criticize or express views at odds with government policy. Government officials also denied citizens the ability to discuss certain matters of general interest, including expression of views concerning political transition. There were reports individuals who criticized the government privately or in public faced reprisals.

Violence and Harassment: Police, gendarmes, and other government agents arrested, detained, physically attacked, and intimidated journalists. Journalists practiced self-censorship, refraining from subjects that could be perceived as critical of the government due to harassment and

intimidation by the government or by those acting with impunity due to the state's failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on journalists. Journalists and publishers reported cases of telephone harassment and intimidation.

The mutilated body of journalist Arsene Salomon Mbami Zogo, popularly known as Martinez Zogo, was found on January 22 in a Yaoundé suburb. Zogo had been missing since January 17, when witnesses reported his abduction by unknown assailants near a gendarmerie station. Zogo had reported on sensitive topics and populist themes, such as corruption by government officials and their allies. Witness accounts pointed to signs of torture, including burn marks and severed fingers. In a January 22 release, Minister of Communication and government spokesperson René Emmanuel Sadi confirmed Zogo's body displayed signs of torture. He condemned the killing and announced an investigation was underway to find the perpetrators. The government detained several suspects for the killing, including Maxime Eko Eko, head of the General Directorate of External Research, and Justin Danwe, operations director of the same entity. In December, authorities arrested an additional suspect, Stephan Savom, Mayor of Bibey in the Central Region. At year's end, the suspects remained in detention as the government continued its investigation.

In March, the divisional officer of Nkongsamba's 2nd district, Youfedi Hamid, issued a message to security forces requesting they prevent four journalists (Riphin Ngoppe, publisher of *La Voix du Moungo*, Nana Serge of *Tribune Libre*, Hen Château of *LTM*, and Franck Lionel Difo of *DBS TV*) from covering events taking place in his constituency until further notice. During March 12 senatorial elections, Hamid ordered Ngoppe to leave a polling station during ballot counting, thus preventing him from reporting on the voting process. Hamid used allegations the journalist had harassed civil servants in August 2022 to justify his exclusion.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, including Online Media: By law the Ministry of Communication required editors to submit two signed copies of their newspapers within two hours of publication, although the government did not enforce, and publishers did not comply with, this requirement. The Ministry of Communication had supervisory authority over media outlets and accredited audiovisual media organizations; the central government also accredited print media. Journalists and media outlets reported practicing self-censorship, especially if the nominally independent media regulator, the National Communication Council (NCC), had suspended them previously. Authorities threatened journalists, and the NCC suspended journalists and publishers based on public complaints and for content deemed at odds with government policy. During the year, the NCC sanctioned media professionals from seven outlets, with penalties ranging from a total ban of the outlet to three months' suspension from the practice of journalism. Prominent among the sanctions were one-month bans for English-language newspaper *The Post* and its editor after an employee mistakenly released an image of a draft front page that contained the headline "66% of Cameroonians want a military coup – Afrobarometer Survey," even though the front page in question was never actually published or disseminated to the public.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel, slander, defamation, and blasphemy were treated as criminal offenses. The law authorized the government to initiate a criminal suit when the president or other senior government officials were the alleged victims. These laws placed the burden of proof on the defendant, and crimes were punishable by prison terms and substantial fines. Ordinary citizens could also file libel or slander suits, but the law was often applied selectively and with deference to senior government officials and well-connected individuals. There were no known cases prosecuted under libel, slander, or blasphemy laws during the year.

National Security: Authorities often cited laws against terrorism or protecting national security to threaten critics of the government. Several journalists remained in detention on terrorism charges, including Kingsley Njoka, who, after reporting on the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest, was accused of terrorism ("complicity with an armed gang") and held in pretrial detention for more than two years before appearing before a military tribunal in late 2022. In January, a judge presiding over his case ordered a retrial before a new panel. Njoka remained in detention at year's end.

Nongovernmental Impact: There were several reported cases of armed separatist groups in the Southwest and Northwest Regions explicitly inhibiting freedom of expression, including for the press. In addition, concern for personal security and restrictions on movement imposed by armed separatists contributed to further limit freedom of expression for media members.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt internet access or censor online content.

B. FREEDOMS OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

Although the law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, the government often restricted these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law required organizers of public meetings, demonstrations, and processions to notify officials in advance but did not require prior government approval for public gatherings, nor did it authorize the government to suppress public gatherings it had not approved in advance. Nevertheless, officials frequently claimed the law implicitly allowed the government to grant or deny permission for public gatherings. The government often granted permits for gatherings on a selective basis and used force to suppress gatherings for which it had not issued permits.

Authorities typically cited security concerns as the basis for deciding to block gatherings. On January 30, opposition politician Cabral Libii informed authorities in Yaoundé of a planned public meeting to protest the killing of journalist Martinez Zogo. On January 31, authorities asked Libii to suspend the meeting due to a claimed vagueness of purpose and the risk it could lead to violence. According to the CHRC, Libii's judicial appeal of the government decision was rejected.

According to media sources and Libii's public statements, in March the Ministry of Territorial Administration twice denied Libii authorization to hold a separate public protest against electricity cuts. In the first instance, the government asserted that holding it on the proposed March 12 date (the same day as senatorial elections) would constitute political activities on election day in contravention of the law. Libii rescheduled his planned event for a week later, which the ministry then denied on the grounds that the organizers would be unable to control the crowd.

In contrast with previous years, authorities allowed the opposition party MRC to hold public meetings during the year, although often not in the venues chosen by party leaders.

Freedom of Association

The law permitted the Ministry of Territorial Administration, on the recommendation of local officials, to suspend the activities of an association for three months on grounds the association was disrupting public order. The minister could also dissolve an association if it was deemed a threat to state security. National associations could acquire legal status by declaring themselves in writing to the ministry, but the ministry was explicitly required to register foreign associations. The president was required to accredit religious groups upon the recommendation of the minister of territorial administration. The law imposed substantial fines for individuals who formed and operated any such association without ministry approval. The law prohibited organizations that advocated goals contrary to the constitution, laws, and morality, as well as those that aimed to challenge the security, territorial integrity, national unity, national integration, or republican form of the state.

Conditions for recognition of political parties, NGOs including human rights groups, and associations were complicated, involved long delays, and were unevenly enforced. This resulted in

associations operating in legal uncertainty with their activities tolerated but not formally approved (see section 5).

On July 12, the Ministry of Territorial Administration issued a ban on the activities of the Evangelical Church of Cameroon. The written ban cited as reasons, among other things, the threat of serious disturbance to public order. On August 19, the ban was lifted, and regular worship services resumed.

C. FREEDOM OF RELIGION

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

D. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

Although the constitution and law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, at times the government and nonstate armed groups restricted these freedoms.

In-country Movement: Using minor infractions as a pretext, police, gendarmes, and custom officers reportedly extorted bribes and harassed travelers at roadblocks and checkpoints in cities and on highways. Police frequently stopped travelers to check identification documents, including national identity cards, passports, residence permits, vehicle registrations, customs status, and tax receipts as security and immigration control measures. NGOs reported problems in accessing vulnerable communities as a result.

As in the previous year, armed separatists restricted the movements of persons and goods in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, sometimes in a deliberate attempt to harass and intimidate the local population. Separatists often used weekly lockdowns referred to as “ghost towns” to enforce restrictions on movement, in which the armed separatists demanded all businesses, schools, and places of worship close, and residents stay home. Violent crime, including kidnapping by terrorists, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, assault, and carjacking were major impediments to in-country movement in the three northern regions as well as in part of the East Region.

Separatists continued to enforce a lockdown of the Northwest and Southwest Regions on Mondays as well as on numerous public holidays and days of public events. During the lockdown periods, all vehicles were banned from the roads in these regions. Separatists warned that any person or group of persons contravening the ban would be punished.

E. PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

The government generally cooperated with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees, but implementation of this system was weak. UNHCR continued to provide documentation and assistance to the refugee population, although local authorities did not always recognize the documents as official, which prevented refugees from traveling and engaging in employment activities.

Freedom of Movement: The government generally did not provide identity documents in a timely manner to refugees and other persons in need of primary documentation, and UNHCR-issued cards

were often insufficient to permit refugees to travel freely and integrate socioeconomically. To help address the situation, a government pilot program issued national biometric identification cards to 6,000 of an estimated 200,000 refugees from the Central African Republic in the East Region.

Employment: Although there were no credible reports the government restricted refugees' ability to work after their refugee status was official, government delay in the provision of identity documents was a problem as refugees without such documents faced significant obstacles to employment in the formal sector.

Durable Solutions: There was no evidence the government accepted refugees for resettlement or offered naturalization to refugees residing in its territory. The government assisted in the voluntary return of persons to Nigeria and the Central African Republic.

Temporary Protection: The government continued to provide temporary and unofficial protection to individuals who might not qualify as refugees, extending this protection to hundreds of individuals, including persons who had fled violence in the Central African Republic. Due to their unofficial status and inability to access services or support, many of these individuals were subject to harassment and other abuses by employers in the informal sector.

F. STATUS AND TREATMENT OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS)

According to June UNHCR estimates, there were 1,066,254 IDPs. Reports indicated IDP girls were particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

For further information about IDPs in the country, please see the materials of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center: <https://www.internal-displacement.org>.

Section 3.

Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: National elections, last conducted in March 12 indirect polling for senate seats, were reported to be generally fair and free of major irregularities.

Political Parties and Political Participation: At year's end, the country had approximately 330 registered political parties. The ruling party remained dominant at every level of government due to restrictions on opposition political parties, gerrymandering, unbalanced media coverage, the use of state funds to promote party campaigns, interference with the right of opposition parties to register as candidates and to organize during electoral campaigns, and undue influence of traditional rulers. Traditional rulers who refused to associate with the government were either removed or threatened with the loss of all income. Membership in the ruling party conferred significant advantages, including in the allocation of key jobs in state-owned entities and the civil service.

Human rights organizations and opposition political groups asserted the processes of drawing up voter districts and distributing parliamentary and municipal councilor seats were unfair. They complained that small districts considered ruling party strongholds were allocated a disproportionate number of seats compared with more populous districts where the opposition was

expected to poll strongly. Managers of state-owned companies and other high-level government officials reportedly used government resources to campaign for candidates sponsored by the ruling party.

Participation of Women and Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: Societal stigma and the criminalization of same-sex sexual conduct deterred members of the LGBTQI+ community from full participation in the political process, such as running for elected office. Leaders of the Indigenous Mbororo people expressed concern their political rights were marginalized, noting no political party included a member of the Mbororo as a candidate in the March senate elections. They also pointed out no member of their community was among the 30 senators appointed by the president. Persons with disabilities experienced discrimination in the selection of political party candidates (see section 6, Indigenous Peoples, and also Persons with Disabilities).

Section 4.

Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption.

Corruption: The government encouraged reporting of corruption by exempting whistleblowers from criminal prosecution. The National Anti-Corruption Agency (CONAC), the National Financial Investigation Agency, the Ministry in Charge of Supreme State Audit, and the Audit Bench of the Supreme Court had roles in fighting corruption. CONAC, the leading anti-corruption agency, was constrained by an absence of any legislative or presidential mandate. There were reports senior officials sentenced to prison were not always required to forfeit their ill-gotten gains.

As in the previous year, there were new allegations of corruption involving public officials. The Special Criminal Court (TCS) prosecuted corruption cases. On January 31, the TCS delivered its verdict in the embezzlement case of former Minister of Defense Alain Edgar Mebe Ngo'o and four codefendants, finding Mebe Ngo'o guilty of offenses including overbilling of contracts for military equipment worth almost \$40 million. His wife, Bernadette Mebe Ngo'o, was found guilty of complicity in the embezzlement of \$8.3 million in public funds. The TCS sentenced Mebe Ngo'o to 30 years' imprisonment and his wife to 10 years. Other accomplices in the case were also found guilty and sentenced to prison terms ranging from nine to 25 years. In addition to these sentences, the TCS ordered asset forfeitures, civil damages, and fines.

On June 14, the TCS sentenced former Camwater Managing Director Jean William Sollo to 15 years in prison, the second person convicted in a case alleging the embezzlement of \$220,000 and misappropriation of additional public funds.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5.

Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

Several domestic and international human rights groups monitored and investigated human rights conditions and cases and published their findings. Government officials were rarely cooperative or responsive to their views. Government officials impeded many local human rights NGOs by

harassing their members, limiting access to prisoners, and refusing to share information. Authorities took no action to investigate or prevent such occurrences.

Retribution against Human Rights Defenders: Some organizations continued to face difficulties renewing their accreditations following a 2021 directive by the Ministry of Territorial Administration that threatened to suspend groups that did not seek reauthorization within one month. This negatively impacted the operations of the NGO Un Monde Avenir, which could no longer open a bank account or continue to receive funding from longstanding partners. Although activists and human rights defenders reported threats to their personal safety due to their work, these reports could not be corroborated or linked specifically to the government.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The CHRC was established in 2019 to promote and protect human rights and prevent torture in detention facilities. The CHRC was nominally independent, although it relied on the government for funding and access to government ministries to conduct investigations. The CHRC coordinated actions with NGOs, participated in inquiry commissions, provided training on human rights for government officials, and issued statements on human rights matters. It also operated a hotline that allowed for anonymous reports of human rights abuses, including cases of torture. The CHRC did not have the authority, however, to initiate legal proceedings or otherwise hold human rights abusers accountable, which limited its effectiveness.

Section 6.

Discrimination and Societal Abuses

WOMEN

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape but did not specify whether it applied to both women and men. The law did not address spousal rape. Penalties for conviction ranged from five to 10 years' imprisonment. The law was not enforced effectively, and police and courts rarely investigated or prosecuted rape cases, especially since survivors often did not report them. Members of the Cameroonian Bar Association attributed a lack of enforcement of gender-based violence laws in part to the expense and limited availability of rape kits and emergency medical care, which they claimed made it difficult to prosecute cases.

The law did not specifically prohibit domestic violence, although assault was prohibited and punishable by imprisonment and fines. Reports suggested domestic violence was a major problem. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported 39 percent of women experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner at some time in their life.

The government provided support to survivors of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence, including legal support, general clinical care offered in health facilities, and collection of data. Many of the prevention and basic support programs for survivors of gender-based violence were implemented by community-based organizations.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law prohibited FGM/C. Offenders were subject to prison sentences of 10 to 20 years, or imprisonment for life if the offender habitually carried out this practice for commercial purposes or if the practice caused death. Authorities enforced the law when complainants pursued cases; however, judicial delays and societal stigma discouraged many women from filing complaints, and successful prosecutions were extremely rare.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: Widows were sometimes forcibly married to one of their deceased husband's relatives, especially in rural communities, to secure continued use of property left by the deceased husband, including the marital home. The practice of widow rites, by which widows were subject to certain trials such as bathing in public or movement

restrictions, was prevalent in rural communities in the West Region. Anecdotal reports suggested breast ironing, the process of forcibly flattening emerging breasts in pubescent girls, continued to exist in some rural communities.

Sexual harassment remained widespread. There were no known reports during the year that anyone was fined or imprisoned for sexual harassment, in part due to survivor reluctance to file official complaints due to the risk of reprisal or stigmatization.

Media reported multiple cases of femicide. Authorities reportedly investigated at least some of the cases and detained suspects.

Discrimination: The constitution and law provided women and men the same legal status and rights, but the government often did not enforce the law. Although local government officials claimed women had access to land in their constituencies, the overall sociocultural practice of denying women the right to own land, especially through inheritance, was prevalent in most regions. There were legal restrictions to women's employment in some occupations and industries. Within the private sector, fewer women occupied positions of responsibility than men.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

In most parts of the country, prenatal clinics monitored and assisted women through pregnancy and childbirth. Women also had access to emergency care, including services for the management of complications arising from abortion, even though abortion was generally not permitted. The Ministry of Public Health offered counseling services to women during prenatal visits, promoting the concept of responsible parenthood and encouraging couples to use contraception to space the timing of their children. Many women, however, lacked the means to manage their reproductive health, and societal pressures continued to reinforce taboos on discussing reproductive health within certain communities. Women's dependence on receiving spousal consent continued to be a barrier in contraception decisions.

The government did not readily provide emergency contraception or postexposure prophylaxis to survivors of sexual violence. The United Nations Population Fund provided a kit with emergency contraception to some clinical sites as part of clinical care for gender-based violence survivors.

According to a 2017 World Health Organization report, the most recent available data, the maternal mortality rate was 529 deaths per 100,000 live births. Factors that contributed to the high rate included distance to health facilities in rural areas, poverty, and security crises in the Northwest, Southwest, and Far North Regions.

Menstruation and limited access to sanitary products affected girls' access to education. Pregnancy and motherhood often impeded adolescent girls' access to education, and a 2022 study *Teenage Childbearing and School Dropout in a Sample of 18,791 Single Mothers in Cameroon* showed that 41.6 percent of those surveyed had dropped out of school because of pregnancy. As a measure to encourage pregnant girls to remain in school, the Ministry of Secondary Education allowed pregnant students to continue with school until the 26th week of pregnancy, after which they could request to be placed on maternity leave.

SYSTEMIC RACIAL OR ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

The constitution stated the government should protect "minorities and preserve the rights of indigenous populations in accordance with the law," but it did not identify specific groups that qualified as minorities or Indigenous populations. The laws and regulations on decentralization and elections also protected the rights of minorities by requiring that lists of electoral candidates reflect the sociological landscape of constituencies, or that the office of president of a regional council or city mayor be held by a native of the constituency. The government made efforts to enforce these

provisions, but discrimination and violence persisted, including employment discrimination based on ethnicity.

While there were no reliable reports of governmental violence or discrimination against members of racial, ethnic, or national minorities, there were reports of societal violence along ethnic lines during the year, although it was not always clear whether ethnicity was the primary reason for the violence.

In February, after Sultan Mouhammad Nabil Mforifoum Mbombo, the traditional leader of the Bamoun community, was accused of insulting the traditional leader of the Tikar community, His Majesty Soulé Ngamon III, members of the Tikar community engaged in acts of vandalism targeting Bamoun property and businesses.

On May 24, a communal clash erupted in Sangmelima in the South Region, involving the native Bulu and nonnative Bamoun communities from the West Region. Armed with clubs and machetes, dozens of Bulu youth ransacked Bamoun homes, injuring dozens of individuals and destroying shops. Media reports suggested the riot was triggered when a Bamoun trader threatened a Bulu youth. The young man eventually died, and allegations regarding the cause of his death caused the unrest.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The Indigenous Baka people, including the Bakola and Bagyeli, resided primarily in (and were the earliest known inhabitants of) the forested areas of the South and East Regions. The government did not effectively protect their civil or political rights. Logging companies continued to destroy their forested land without compensation. Other ethnic groups often treated the Baka as inferior and sometimes subjected them to unfair and exploitative labor practices. The government continued long-standing efforts to provide birth certificates and national identity cards to Baka. Nonetheless, most Baka did not have these documents, and efforts to reach them were impeded by the difficulty in reaching homes deep in the forest.

There were reports from NGOs that the Indigenous Mbororo people, nomadic pastoralists living mostly in the North, East, Adamawa, and Northwest Regions, continued to be subject to harassment, sometimes with the complicity of administrative or judicial authorities. Mbororo leaders expressed concern their political rights were marginalized.

Amnesty International and the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association reported in June and September respectively that the conflict in the Northwest Region had brought to the fore simmering tensions between armed separatist groups and the local Mbororo population. The Mbororo, many of whom were Muslim and clashed with the dominant Christian population concerning land disputes, were excluded and marginalized prior to the crisis in the Northwest. The conflict only exacerbated their status, with armed separatists suspecting Mbororo of collaborating with the government due to a history of Mbororo voting for the ruling party. As a result, some Mbororo joined armed vigilante groups that reportedly clashed with separatist armed groups viewed as targeting Mbororo.

CHILDREN

Birth Registration: Many births went unregistered because children were not always born in health facilities. Children without birth certificates were unable to register for official examinations to enter secondary school or secure other legally required identity documents.

Education: A 2019 UN report, the most recent available data, highlighted gender disparity in education, particularly in secondary education. According to the report, the literacy rate in 2019 was lower for women and girls (86 percent) than for men and boys (97 percent).

Child Abuse: The law prohibited various forms of child abuse, including but not limited to assault, indecency, kidnapping, forced labor, rape, sexual harassment, and situations where one parent refused to disclose the identity of the other parent to the child. Despite these legal provisions, authorities did not enforce the law effectively, and child abuse remained a problem. Children continued to receive corporal punishment both within families and at school.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage was 18, but the law was not enforced effectively. UNICEF's 2018 child marriage data revealed 31 percent of women between ages 20 to 24 were married before age 18 and 11 percent were married before age 15. Early and forced marriages, as well as abusive "temporal marriages," were more prevalent in the northern part of the country and some parts of the West Region, especially in the Noun Division.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited the commercial sexual exploitation of children and the sale, offering, grooming, or procuring of children for sex trafficking and practices related to child pornography. The country'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. Authorities enforced laws against child pornography, but other laws against the sexual exploitation of children were not effectively enforced.

According to anecdotal reports, traffickers exploited children younger than age 18 in sex trafficking, although no statistics were available. Anecdotal reports suggested the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions had contributed to a dramatic increase in child sex trafficking and an increased number of early pregnancies, especially in areas with IDPs. Reports identified the Bonaberi neighborhood in Douala as a hub for the sexual exploitation of underage IDP girls. The law did not set a minimum age for consensual sex.

Infanticide, Including Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: The law prohibited the practice, and the government generally enforced the law effectively. There were isolated media reports of the practice. For example, media reported that on April 9 in Bafoussam in the West Region, Raissa Makoua gave birth to a baby and left the newborn in a septic tank. The child was rescued by first responders. Makoua was arrested and detained on April 11, and authorities reportedly opened an investigation. There were no known developments at year's end.

ANTISEMITISM

The Jewish population was very small, and there were no known reports of antisemitic incidents.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

ACTS OF VIOLENCE, CRIMINALIZATION, AND OTHER ABUSES BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION, OR SEX CHARACTERISTICS

Criminalization: Consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults was illegal and punishable with imprisonment from six months to five years plus a fine. The government enforced the law. Police often detained LGBTQI+ individuals based solely on their perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, including individuals who had sought police assistance after being the victims of violent crimes.

According to LGBTQI+ rights organizations, in January Maya Brenda was arrested and detained in Douala after being accused by the mother of a child, age 17, of having an inappropriate relationship

with her daughter. Brenda was convicted of attempted corruption of a child and sentenced to five years in prison.

Sale Garba was arbitrarily detained at a Douala police station in January before being transferred to the central prison on February 9. While in police station custody, Garba was not allowed to take his HIV medication for two days. He was accused of having a romantic and sexual relationship with a child age 17. The child and his father petitioned a court to be removed from the case, but the investigating magistrate instead issued a warrant detaining Garba for a six-month renewable period. A human rights NGO reported a trial judge ordered his release on bail in October, but Garba remained detained because he lacked the resources to post bail.

On May 9, the Littoral Region Court of Appeals in Douala affirmed a 2021 trial court verdict that sentenced two transgender women to five years in prison and fines, citing legal provisions that prohibited same-sex sexual relations. Gendarmes arrested the two in Douala in 2021 and charged them with “attempted homosexuality,” public indecency, and nonpossession of national identity cards. The defendants were released in July 2022 pending their appeal, and they were not reincarcerated after the ruling.

Violence and Harassment: LGBTQI+ human rights organizations continued to report arbitrary arrests of LGBTQI+ persons. LGBTQI+ individuals faced significant stigma and violence from their families, communities, and the government, including police. Security forces sometimes harassed, detained, and assaulted persons based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including individuals found with condoms and lubricants.

The LGBTQI+ rights NGO Colibri reported between January and March, it identified 129 cases of nonstate actor violence and harassment, including withholding of paychecks, psychological abuse, family rejection, and physical violence in the form of battery, assault, and rape. In one case, an LGBTQI+ individual was reportedly encouraged by his family to commit suicide, although he did not do so. In a video obtained by human rights activists through social media, a member of the LGBTQI+ community was shown cowering in the corner of a small room while unknown persons off-camera hurled blocks of concrete at him. The activists reported the incident took place in January.

In January, NGO Humanity First Cameroon reported an attack on a gay man after he agreed to meet a man who claimed to be a contact from an LGBTQI+ group on a mobile messaging platform. When he arrived, he was attacked by the man and three others who robbed him, stripped him, and made him admit to being gay on video, which was then disseminated to his family and friends.

Discrimination: The constitution prohibited discrimination and prescribed equal rights for all citizens; however, the law did not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. The law did not specifically recognize LGBTQI+ individuals, couples, or their families. LGBTQI+ persons faced significant societal discrimination, including in employment. Risk of exposure affected individuals’ willingness to access health services related to HIV and AIDS.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: Legal gender recognition was not available.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: The law did not specifically address these practices. Anecdotal reports indicated some members of the LGBTQI+ community were survivors of “corrective rape,” forced marriage, and forced pregnancies to compel them to change their sexual orientation or gender identity. Family members of LGBTQI+ individuals also reportedly enlisted traditional healers and psychologists to coerce LGBTQI+ individuals into abandoning their sexual orientation.

There were no reports of medically unnecessary and irreversible “normalization” surgeries performed on children or on nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: Although the law did not specifically prohibit their registration, LGBTQI+ organizations were not permitted to register officially as such and thus registered either as general human rights organizations or as health-focused organizations. Many LGBTQI+ organizations reported that operating health programs, particularly HIV prevention and treatment programs, shielded them from potential harassment or shutdown, although promoting advocacy for LGBTQI+ persons was their primary mission.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Persons with disabilities were not able to access education, employment, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The law provided protection to persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities, including access to education and vocational training, employment, health services, information and cultural activities, communications, buildings, sports and leisure, transportation, housing, and other state services. The government did not enforce these provisions effectively. Some infrastructure projects were constructed to provide accessibility to persons with mobility impediments. The government did not always provide information and communication on disability concerns in formats that were accessible to persons with disabilities.

There were no reports of police or other government officials inciting, perpetrating, or condoning violence against persons with disabilities. A study during the year by a consortium of health practitioners found that children with disabilities were at a particularly elevated risk of abuse. The study found that physical abuse, most commonly in the form of corporal punishment or excessive labor, was the most frequent form of abuse. Persons with disabilities faced discrimination in employment and occupation.

Under the law, public education was free for persons with disabilities and children born of parents with disabilities, and some children with disabilities attended school with peers without disabilities. NGOs reported many parents of children with disabilities did not send their children to school. The government introduced inclusive education in many schools and reviewed the curriculum of teacher training colleges to include training in inclusive education skills. Other children with disabilities continued to attend separate schools, such as the Bulu Blind Center in Buea and the Yaoundé Special School for Hearing-Impaired Children.

Government inaction limited the rights of persons with disabilities to participate in civic life, including lack of access to polling sites.

OTHER SOCIETAL VIOLENCE OR DISCRIMINATION

According to the Association of Women Albinos of Cameroon, persons with albinism faced ostracism within their communities, including the abandonment of babies and children with albinism. The problem was particularly acute in the Far North Region. Persons with albinism also faced obstacles accessing adequate health services despite high rates of skin cancer and vision problems. Persons with albinism faced discrimination in employment and occupation.

Persons with HIV often suffered social discrimination and were isolated from their families and society, in part due to a lack of education regarding the disease. As in the previous year, while no specific cases of discrimination in employment were available for citation, anecdotal reports indicated some discrimination occurred with respect to HIV status, especially in the private sector.

Section 7.

A. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The law provided for the rights of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct strikes, but with significant restrictions. The right did not apply to defined groups of workers, including defense and national security personnel, prison administration civil servants, and judicial and legal personnel. The law also prohibited antiunion discrimination and required the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. Statutory limitations and other practices substantially restricted these rights. The law did not permit the creation of a union that included both public- and private-sector workers or the creation of a union that included different sectors, even if closely related. The law required that unions register with the government, have a minimum of 20 members, and formalize the union by submitting a constitution and bylaws. Founding members were also required to have clean police records. Those who formed a union and carried out union activities without registration were subject to fines. Unions were prohibited from carrying out any activity that was not related to the study, defense, development, and protection of the interests of workers.

More than 100 trade unions and 12 trade union confederations were in operation, including one public-sector confederation. Trade unions or associations of public servants were not permitted to join a foreign occupational or labor organization without prior authorization from the minister of territorial administration, who was responsible for “supervising public freedoms.”

The constitution and law provided for collective bargaining between workers and management as well as between labor federations and business associations in each sector of the economy. The law did not obligate employers to bargain. The law did not apply to the agricultural or informal sectors, which included most of the workforce.

Legal strikes or lockouts could be called only after conciliation and arbitration procedures were exhausted. Workers who ignored procedures to conduct a strike were subject to dismissal or fines. Free industrial zones were subject to labor laws, but there were several exceptions limiting worker rights. Within free industrial zones, employers had the right to determine salaries according to productivity, which could bypass minimum wage requirements, to negotiate work contracts free of labor law regulations, and to issue work permits for foreign workers without the normally lengthy government oversight process. Laws intended to target terrorists could impose harsh legal penalties on legitimate trade union activity.

The government and employers did not effectively enforce the applicable laws on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Penalties for violations were rarely applied against violators and were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. Administrative and judicial procedures were infrequent and subject to lengthy delays and appeals.

Many employers continued to use subcontractors to avoid hiring workers with collective bargaining rights. Major companies, including quasi state-run and state-operated companies, reportedly engaged in the practice, according to workers from Energy of Cameroon, the water supply company Camerounaise des Eaux, cement manufacturer Cimencam, Guinness, Aluminum Smelter, Cameroon Oil Transportation Company, Ecobank, and many others. Subcontracting reportedly involved all categories of personnel, from the lowest to senior levels. As a result, workers with equal expertise and experience did not always enjoy similar protections when working for the same business, and subcontracted personnel typically lacked a legal basis to file complaints.

Several strikes were announced. Some were called off after successful negotiations, others were carried out peacefully, and others faced some degree of repression.

Health personnel working in various facilities, including the Yaoundé Emergency Center, began a strike on May 22, protesting what they referred to as nine years of poor working conditions, including missing salaries and bonuses and a lack of adequate equipment. On June 5, workers escalated their protest by marching to the Ministry of Public Health. Security forces dispersed them with tear gas and batons, arrested some of the protesters, and took them to unknown destinations. According to the CHRC, the arrested protesters were not mistreated and were released the same day. Workers resumed duties after the government agreed to establish an interministerial committee to examine their grievances. As of November, there were no indications the workers and their employers had secured an agreement.

B. PROHIBITION OF FORCED OR COMPULSORY LABOR

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

C. PROHIBITION OF CHILD LABOR AND MINIMUM AGE FOR EMPLOYMENT

See the Department of Labor's Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>

D. DISCRIMINATION (SEE SECTION 6)

E. ACCEPTABLE CONDITIONS OF WORK

Wage and Hour Laws: On March 21, the government increased the minimum guaranteed wage and established three distinct minimum wages for different categories of labor. The minimum wage in all sectors was greater than the World Bank's poverty line. Premium pay for overtime ranged from 120 to 150 percent of the hourly rate, depending on the amount of overtime and whether it was weekend or late-night overtime. Despite the minimum wage law, employers often negotiated lower wages with workers, in part due to an extremely high rate of underemployment in the country. Salaries lower than the minimum wage remained prevalent in the public works sector, where many positions required unskilled labor, as well as in domestic work, where women refugees were particularly vulnerable to unfair labor practices.

The law established a standard workweek of 40 hours in public and private nonagricultural firms and a total of 2,400 hours per year, with a maximum limit of 48 hours per week in agricultural and related activities. There were exceptions for guards and firefighters (56 hours per week), service-sector staff (45 hours per week), and household and restaurant staff (54 hours per week). The law mandated at least 24 consecutive hours of rest weekly.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government set appropriate occupational safety and health (OSH) standards in the workplace. The minister of labor and social security established a list of occupational diseases in consultation with the National Commission on Industrial Hygiene and Safety. Ministry inspectors and occupational health physicians were responsible for monitoring OSH standards.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Ministry of Labor and Social Security was responsible for enforcement of the minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws but did not do so effectively. Labor inspectors were permitted to conduct unannounced inspections and attempted to do so when they had derogatory information regarding a business. Unannounced visits were sometimes thwarted due to a lack of political will in some sectors, like mining, the target business's lack of cooperation, and, in some instances, physical threats from business employees. Penalties for

violations of the law were not commensurate with those for comparable crimes, such as negligence. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. Unconfirmed but credible reports suggested some businesses did not provide health services to their employees, as required by law but rarely enforced. The government more than doubled the total number of labor inspectors during the year, but the number was still insufficient, and the ministry lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program. During the year, the state-owned National Mining Corporation implemented a public awareness campaign to reduce child labor in mines.

The International Labor Organization reported informal workers made up 90 percent of the labor force in the country. The government did not enforce labor laws and regulations in the informal sector.