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Cameroon: Rising Violence Against LGBTI People

No Protection from Group Attacks; Authorities Arrest, Detain Victims

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A rainbow LGBT pride flag. © Wikimedia Commons

(Nairobi) – Security forces in [Cameroon](#) are failing to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people from violent attacks and instead are arresting the victims, Human Rights Watch said today. There has been an uptick in violence and abuse against LGBTI people in Cameroon in 2022, according to a leading [civil society](#) group.

Since March 9, security forces have arbitrarily arrested at least six people and detained 11, all of them victims of group attacks, for alleged consensual same-sex conduct and gender nonconformity. Gendarmes beat two of them in detention.

“Cameroon’s law criminalizing same-sex conduct has created a climate that allows both other Cameroonians and security forces to abuse and assault LGBTI people without

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consequence,” said [Ilaria Allegrozzi](#), senior Central Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The authorities should take urgent action to revoke this discriminatory law and to ensure that the human rights of all Cameroonians, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics, are upheld.”

Cameroon’s [law](#) prohibits consensual same-sex relations, a crime punishable with up to five years in prison. Since Cameroon’s penal code criminalizes consensual same-sex conduct, not LGBTI identity, arrests of people on the basis of perceived identity are unlawful. Nonetheless, the legal environment, compounded by widespread social stigma and discrimination, allow violence to proliferate, while security forces fail to protect LGBTI people from group violence and instead arrest and detain those who report it.

SECTION 347-1: Homosexuality

“Whoever has sexual relations with a person of the same sex shall be punished with imprisonment for from 6 (six) months to 5 (five) years and a fine of from CFAF 20 000 (twenty thousand) to CFAF 200 000 (two hundred thousand).”

Section 347-1 of the Cameroon’s penal code criminalising same-sex conduct.
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Between April 1 and 22, Human Rights Watch interviewed 12 people by phone, including six people who were assaulted by groups of people, four of whom were arrested and detained. Human Rights Watch also interviewed lawyers representing LGBTI people, and four members of Cameroonian nongovernmental organizations advocating for the rights of LGBTI people. Human Rights Watch also reviewed reports by Cameroonian LGBTI organizations, court documents, medical records, videos, and photographs showing victims’ injuries and damage to their property.

Human Rights Watch shared its findings with Justice Minister Laurent Eso; Yves Landry Etoga, the state secretary at the Defense Ministry in charge of the national gendarmerie; and Martin Mbarga Nguele, the delegate general for national security, in separate letters sent on May 2 requesting answers to specific questions on the findings. None have responded.

Since the beginning of the year, the Cameroonian Foundation for AIDS (CAMFAIDS), a

prominent human rights organization advocating for LGBTI people, said it recorded 32 cases of violence and abuse against LGBTI people across the country, an increase of 88 percent from the same period in 2021.

On April 10, between 7 and 9 a.m., a crowd of about eight men armed with machetes, knives, sticks, and wooden planks, attacked a group of at least 10 LGBTI people who had attended a party at a private home in the Messassi neighborhood in Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that the armed men first beat a watchman, then stormed the house and pursued their victims through the neighborhood. They severely beat 10 LGBTI people, witnesses and victims interviewed reported.

"Three men kicked me, slapped me, pulled me by my clothes, stole my bag with my phone, and money just because they said I am gay," one of the victims said. "The entire neighborhood was outside watching how as I was being assaulted ... None dared to help me."

A local official from the neighborhood attempted to assist two of the victims, taking them to a gendarmerie brigade. However, the gendarmes on duty beat and humiliated them, then released them later that day after they paid a bribe of 15,000 CFA (US\$D 24).

"Gendarmes held us at the entry of the brigade, on the floor,"



A wound suffered a 32-year-old teacher in a violent attack on March 9, 2022 by a group of people accusing him of homosexuality in Buea, South-West region. © Private, March 9, 2022, Buea, South-West region, Cameroon.

said a 21-year-old man. “They called us ‘faggots,’ ‘devils.’ They said: ‘We should kill you because you are monsters and searched our phones looking for any ‘evidence’ that we were gay. They ordered us to remove our shoes and beat us on the soles of our feet with a machete.”

The other eight LGBTI people remained in the hands of the violent crowd for at least two hours. Some were injured and robbed, including of money and phones. On April 13, CAMFAIDS filed a complaint with the gendarmerie on behalf of the victims for assault, battery, inhuman and degrading treatment, theft, threats, defamation, and trespassing. The gendarmerie investigation is pending.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has ruled that the criminalization of consensual same-sex conduct between adults violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Cameroon is a state party. The [Yogyakarta Principles](#), on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, assert that states are required to “...prevent and provide protection from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, perpetrated for reasons relating to the sexual orientation or gender identity of the victim, as well as the incitement of such acts.”

The African Commission on Human and People’s Rights explicitly [calls on](#) member states, including Cameroon, [to protect sexual and gender minorities](#) in accordance with the African Charter and has urged governments to protect people from violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and to bring attackers to justice.

“Cameroon’s criminalization of same-sex relations not only violates its obligations under national and international law but condones an atmosphere of violence and hate against LGBTI people,” said Alice Nkom, a prominent Cameroonian human rights lawyer and LGBTI activist.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented an [uptick](#) in police action against LGBTI people in Cameroon. Between February and April 2021, security forces arrested at least 27 people, including a child, for alleged consensual same-sex conduct or gender nonconformity, beating and subjecting some, including three teenagers ages 15 to 17, to forced anal examinations in detention. These examinations, which have no evidentiary value, are [recognized](#) by the United Nations special rapporteur on torture as cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as a form of ill-treatment that can rise to the level of torture.

Human Rights Watch also documented group attacks against [two transgender women](#) in 2021, and against an [intersex person](#) in Yaoundé in November.

“LGBTI people are being assaulted, threatened, and humiliated in the street while their attackers go free” Allegrozzi said. “Cameroon’s authorities and security forces should be protecting people, not violating their rights because of their presumed sexuality or gender identity.”

For more details about the recent human rights abuses and violence against LGBTI people, please see below.

Group Attack and Arbitrary Detention of a Teacher in Buea (March 9)

On March 9, a group of at least 10 people assaulted a 32-year-old teacher in Buea, Southwest region, accusing him of homosexuality and repeatedly slapping and kicking him and dragging him on the ground. The police arrested three alleged attackers, but took their statements and then released them, the victim’s lawyer said. The police also detained the teacher on suspicion of homosexuality. He was released the following day after paying a bribe of 50,000 CFA (\$82).

Human Rights Watch spoke with a member of a Cameroonian LGBTI association who documented the case, and with the teacher’s lawyer, in addition to reviewing photographs showing the teacher’s injuries. The lawyer said:

When I met the teacher at the police station, I was shocked to see him in such a bad state. He had a blood clot in his right eye, his face was swollen, his clothes torn. I asked the [police] investigator to put the health of my client before anything else. But the teacher spent the night at the police station and was only taken to an infirmary the following morning. He did not see any doctor and was just given pain killers. At the police station, policemen intimidated my client and read him [the section] of the penal code which criminalizes sexual relations between persons of the same sex. The application of this article in Cameroon is totally arbitrary and often leads to violence against people who can be arrested and prosecuted based on the simple suspicion that they are LGBTI.

The lawyer said the teacher is currently not working at the school, while continuing to be paid, after he received a call from his school principal suggesting that he will be transferred to another institution.

The lawyer also said that the teacher doesn’t want to take legal action against the attackers out of fear of retaliation and stigma.

Group Attack and Arbitrary Arrest of 6 LGBTI people in Douala (March 31)

On March 31, at 10 a.m., a group of about 15 men armed with sticks, broken bottles, knives, and machetes broke into at least two homes in Mabanda neighborhood in Douala, Cameroon's economic capital. They destroyed private property and threatened people they suspected of being LGBTI. The attackers then called the police, who came to arrest at least six men, accusing them of homosexuality, two of the victims said. One man was released the same day, while the other five were released between April 1 and 4. At least one had to bribe the police to secure his release.

The two men interviewed were robbed and threatened by the group and subsequently arrested. They showed Human Rights Watch photographs of damage to their property and personal belongings. Human Rights Watch also spoke with two members of a Douala-based LGBTI organization that assisted the victims while they were in custody and afterward.

One of the two men, age 23, said:

I was home, sleeping. Two of my friends were also sleeping at my place. I heard noise from outside. Someone was knocking at my door insistently. So, I opened, and some 15 men broke in screaming: 'Here are the gay men! Look at them! You are bad creatures! God should punish you!' They scattered things around, turned my room upside-down. They stole my money and phone. I was scared. I saw that more armed men were breaking into another home nearby. They [armed men] called the police. The police came, entered my home and searched everywhere. They found lubricants and condoms and accused us of being homosexual. They handcuffed me and my friends and took us to the police station.

The other victim, 21, said:

At the police station, the officers made fun of us of and called us 'faggots.' They took my statement and put me in a cell. In the cell, people also insulted me. The following day, they released me, but only after my sister came and paid a bribe of 100,000 CFA [USD \$164] to the police.

Group Attack Against a Gay Man and His Relatives in Yaoundé (April 5)

During an attack from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. on April 5, a group beat, threatened, insulted, and humiliated a 29-year-old gay man, outside his home in Yaoundé's Bastos neighborhood, as well as his 55-year-old mother and 16-year-old sister, who

tried to defend him. The attackers, at least 20 men and women, some of whom carried sticks, also threw rocks at the victims' home, causing damage.

Human Rights Watch spoke with the man, and consulted medical records, court documents, videos, and photographs showing his and his relatives' injuries, and damages at the victims' home.

He said:

I was outside of my family home ... A woman, my neighbor, approached me and threw a jar full of urine at me. I thought that was just an accident, but she yelled at me. She said she didn't want to see me around because I am gay. She then called the neighbors, who all came to surround me and my sister who had come out to take my defense. They started beating us, I was hit everywhere on my body. My mother also came out and a man among the violent crowd hit her with a stick in her nose. She fainted and fell on the ground. As we rushed her home, the crowd started throwing rocks at us. They were screaming: 'Let's lapidate [stone] them!' Some rocks broke the windows."

According to medical reports issued by the Elig Essono hospital in Yaoundé, reviewed by Human Rights Watch, the man's mother had multiple hematomas all over her body and a wound on her nose. The doctor said that she could not work for at least 10 days due to the severity of her injuries.

On April 7, CAMFAIDS filed a complaint with the police on behalf of the man for assault, battery, and inhuman and degrading treatment. CAMFAIDS is providing support to him, including medical and psychological assistance. The police investigation is pending.

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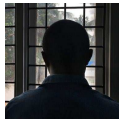
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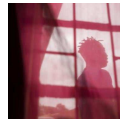
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