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2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - Cameroon

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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Cameroon, with a population of approximately 18 million, is a republic dominated by a strong presidency. The country has a multiparty system of government, but the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) has remained in power since it was created in 1985. The president retains the power to control legislation or to rule by decree. In 2004 CPDM leader Paul Biya won reelection as president, a position he has held since 1982. The election was flawed by irregularities, particularly in the voter registration process, but observers concluded that the election results represented the will of the voters. The July 2007 legislative and municipal elections had significant deficiencies in the electoral process, including barriers to registration and inadequate safeguards against fraudulent voting, according to international and domestic observers. Although civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces, security forces sometimes acted independently of government authority.

The government's human rights record remained poor, and it continued to commit human rights abuses, particularly following widespread February riots to protest increased food and fuel costs. Security forces committed numerous unlawful killings. Security forces also engaged in torture, beatings, and other abuses, particularly of detainees and prisoners. Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening. Authorities arrested and detained anglophone citizens advocating secession, local human rights monitors and activists, persons not carrying government-issued identity cards, and other citizens. There were incidents of prolonged and sometimes incommunicado pretrial detention and infringement on citizens' privacy rights. The government restricted citizens' freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association, and harassed journalists. The government also impeded citizens' freedom of movement. Other problems included widespread official corruption; societal violence and discrimination against women; female genital mutilation (FGM); trafficking in persons, primarily children; and discrimination against pygmies, ethnic minorities, indigenous people, and homosexuals. The government restricted worker rights and the activities of independent labor organizations. Child labor, hereditary servitude, and forced labor, including forced child labor, were problems.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed politically motivated killings; however, throughout the year security forces continued to commit

unlawful killings. There were more of such reports than in the previous year and the government rarely prosecuted officers responsible for using excessive force. The rise of unlawful killings by security forces was mainly attributable to the armed forces' reaction to the violent unrest that gripped Douala and dozens of other cities, sparked by a combination of political and economic frustrations. The government reported at least three unlawful security force killings during the year.

During the February riots, which spread to 31 localities including Yaounde and Douala, and the subsequent government crackdown, security forces shot and killed demonstrators and rioters. While the government reported 40 persons killed, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as La Maison des Droits de l'Homme, stated that security forces killed over 100 persons (see section 2.b.).

There were no new developments in the following 2007 security force killings: the January police shooting of Michele Therese Sename Bella; the suicide of police officer William Etenga, who killed a taxi driver; the police shooting of two taxi drivers in Bamenda; and the shooting of three M'bororo men in Garoua by gendarmes.

There were reports of prisoners dying in custody due to security force abuse during the year.

There were new developments in the 2006 killing of Gregoire Diboule, allegedly by Ni John Fru Ndi, chairman of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), and 21 other SDF officials who belonged to a competing party faction. On November 5, the Mfoundi (Yaounde) High Court released 21 detainees due to their illegal pretrial detention. The court also ruled that the incarceration and arraignment of Mbah Justice Mbah, one of the co-accused, was illegal and acquitted him. However, the court did not dismiss the case and first hearings, which began on December 3, were subsequently delayed until February 26, 2009.

During the year societal violence and summary justice against persons suspected of theft continued to result in deaths. For example, the press reported 13 deaths during the year from mob violence or summary justice while in 2007 the press reported three deaths from such beatings and burning by security forces. In 2006 the press reported 43 reported deaths.

In late January an angry crowd in Tatum, a small locality in Bui Division in the North West Region, burned to death three bandits who had escaped from custody and tried to commit armed robbery; attempts by gendarmes to rescue the three thieves failed. No action had been taken against the perpetrators by year's end.

During the year mob violence was attributed in part to public frustration over police ineffectiveness and the release without charge of many individuals arrested for serious crimes.

There were no new developments in the January 2007 mob violence and summary justice-related case of Walters Akwafe.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances during the year.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices; however, there were credible reports that security forces tortured, beat, and otherwise abused prisoners and detainees, including demonstrators and a human rights worker arrested during the February riots. The government rarely investigated or punished any of the officials involved.

In a March 5 interview with *La Nouvelle Expression* newspaper, barrister Joseph

Lavoisier Tsapy, a lawyer in West Region and a member of the Liberty and Human Rights League, described the treatment that security forces inflicted on individuals arrested during the February riots. Security forces repeatedly stripped, beat, and dumped detainees into ashes from burned tires and broken glass, resulting in numerous injuries (see section 2.b.). At year's end the Liberty and Human Rights League and other human rights organizations, in association with the parents and families of the victims, were still compiling information for a formal complaint.

There were reports that security forces detained persons at specific sites where they tortured and beat detainees. Security forces also reportedly subjected women, children, and elderly persons to abuse. For example, on March 4, during his trial in Douala, Bernard Songo, a student from the University of Douala arrested during the February riots, reported that police officers severely beat him and two co-detainees in the judicial police precinct cells. Journalists covering the trial reported that evidence of the beatings was visible on the victims' bodies.

Numerous international human rights organizations and some prison personnel reported that torture was widespread, but most reports did not identify the victims for fear of government retaliation or because of ignorance of, or lack of confidence in, the judicial system.

In Douala's New Bell Prison and other nonmaximum security penal detention centers, prison guards inflicted beatings, and prisoners were reportedly chained or at times flogged in their cells. Authorities also administered beatings in temporary holding cells within police or gendarmerie facilities.

Security forces reportedly subjected prisoners and detainees to degrading treatment, including stripping them, confining them in severely overcrowded cells, denying them access to toilets or other sanitation facilities, and beating them to extract confessions or information about alleged criminals. Pretrial detainees reported that prison guards sometimes required them, under threat of abuse, to pay "cell fees," a bribe paid to prison guards to prevent further abuse.

On February 26, during a visit to the Yaounde Kondengui Central Prison, Divine Chemuta Banda, chairman of the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (NCHRF), learned that many of the SDF militants incarcerated in 2006 in connection with the death of Gregoire Diboule had been treated inhumanely and denied medical care.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions remained harsh and life threatening. Prisons were seriously overcrowded and unsanitary. The government did not provide funds to improve serious deficiencies in food, health care, and sanitation, which were common in all prisons. However, following significant press coverage of prison conditions and subsequent riots and escape attempts, the government financed the construction of new prisons across the country including one in Yaounde and one in Moulvoudaye, Far North Region, both of which were operational by year's end.

Prisoners were kept in dilapidated, colonial-era prisons, where the number of inmates was as much as four to five times the intended capacity. Overcrowding was exacerbated by the large number of long pretrial detentions. Government officials accused of corruption were held in separate quarters and received special treatment. Some NGOs released a report claiming that cells meant for 30 or 40 persons held more than 100 detainees.

Health and medical care were almost nonexistent in prisons and detention cells located in gendarmeries and police stations. There were reports that prisoners died due to a lack of medical care.

Prisoners also died as a result of inmate abuse. For example, on January 13, prisoners in

the New Bell Prison tried to lynch Ahmend Aliou, who subsequently died in his cell because prison wardens did not provide medical assistance. No action had been taken against prison officials by year's end. On January 14, following the lynching of a prisoner, the superintendent of the Douala New Bell Prison told the press that overcrowding, a lack of segregation within the prison populations, and inhuman detention conditions were the major reasons behind the frequent prison violence. Local NGOs added abysmal food, rampant corruption, and sexual abuse as contributing factors. In early August the Action of Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT), an NGO that regularly visits prisoners, characterized New Bell Prison as "hell on earth."

Prisoners' families were expected to provide food for their relatives in prison. New Bell Prison contained seven water taps for approximately 3,500 prisoners, contributing to poor hygiene, illness, and death.

Individuals incarcerated in the Douala New Bell prison for homosexual acts suffered discrimination and violence from other inmates.

Corruption among prison personnel was widespread. Prisoners bribed wardens for special favors or treatment, including temporary freedom.

There were two separate prisons for women. There were also a few pretrial detention centers for women; however, women routinely were held in police and gendarmerie complexes with men, occasionally in the same cells. Mothers sometimes chose to be incarcerated with their children while their children were very young or if they had no other child care option. The secretary of state in charge of penitentiary administration acknowledged this was a serious problem and on September 24, stated at a training on detainee rights that, "Cameroonian prisons should no longer be perceived or managed as places of repression, torture, or various other abuses."

Juvenile prisoners were often incarcerated with adults, occasionally in the same cells or wards. There were credible reports that adult inmates sexually abused juvenile prisoners.

Pretrial detainees routinely were held in cells with convicted criminals.

Some high-profile prisoners were separated from other prisoners and enjoyed relatively lenient treatment.

Authorities held adult men, juveniles, and women together in temporary detention centers where detainees usually received no food, water, or medical care. Overcrowding was common. Detention center guards accepted bribes from detainees in return for access to better conditions, including permission to stay in an office instead of a cell. Detainees whose families were informed of their incarceration relied on their relatives for food and medical care.

In the North and Extreme North regions, the government continued to permit traditional chiefs, or Lamibe, to detain persons outside the government penitentiary system, in effect creating private prisons. Many citizens turned to the Lamibe for dispute resolution. Within the palaces of the traditional chiefdoms of Rey Bouba, Gashiga, Bibemi, and Tcheboa, there were private prisons that had reputations for serious abuse.

In 2007 there was a report that a Lamido used law enforcement officials to extort money and confiscate cattle from citizens. Authorities held these citizens without access to an attorney for days or weeks, and then sent them to trial in Garoua, where the charges would routinely be dismissed.

The government permitted international humanitarian organizations access to prisoners. Both the local Red Cross and the NCHRF made infrequent, unannounced prison visits during the year. The government continued to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit prisons.

On September 23, the directors of the prisons in Douala and Yaounde released new figures indicating that the Douala New Bell Prison, originally built for approximately 800 inmates, now held 4,000 detainees. The Yaounde Kondengui Prison, originally built for approximately 700 inmates, held 3,500 prisoners. In October penitentiary authorities in Bamenda publicly stated that 700 detainees occupied the prison initially intended to hold less than 50 prisoners.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention; however, security forces continued to arrest and detain citizens arbitrarily.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The national police, the National Intelligence Service (DGRE), the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Territorial Administration, and, to a lesser extent, the Presidential Guard are responsible for internal security. The Ministry of Defense, which includes the gendarmerie, the army, the army's military security unit, and the DGRE, are under an office of the presidency, resulting in strong presidential control of security forces. The national police include the public security force, judicial police, territorial security forces, and frontier police. The national police and the gendarmerie have primary responsibility for law enforcement. In rural areas, where there is little or no police presence, the primary law enforcement body is the gendarmerie.

Police were ineffective, poorly trained, underpaid, and corrupt. Impunity was a problem.

Individuals reportedly paid bribes to police and the judiciary to secure their freedom. Police demanded bribes at checkpoints, and influential citizens reportedly paid police to make arrests or abuse individuals involved in personal disputes.

Citizens viewed police as ineffective, which frequently resulted in mob justice (see section 1.a.).

In August the president signed decrees creating police stations and appointing police personnel in the Bakassi area, a region returned from Nigeria in August. In 2007 Mebe Ngo'o, the general delegate for National Security, created new mobile police units and precincts in Yaounde and Douala to improve professionalism and increase police visibility. During the year investigations resulted in sanctions against more than 50 police officers including corruption, falsification of official documents, abuse of authority, use of excessive force, extortion of money, arbitrary arrest, blackmailing, and aggravated theft.

On February 13, Mebe Ngo'o suspended Police Commissioner Francois Xavier Minyem, the officer in charge of inspecting units at the Littoral Provincial Delegation, for three months without pay for corruption.

On April 22, Mebe Ngo'o suspended Senior Police Commissioner Simon Menzouo of the East Region Judiciary Police, for corruption and the embezzlement of property seized as evidence.

On May 15, he also sanctioned Francis Melone Mbe, the director of border police, for corruption in connection with the issuance of passports.

In late August dozens of police officers completed a three-month training seminar that included citizens' rights, human rights, and individual freedoms.

Arrest and Detention

The law requires police to obtain an arrest warrant except when a person is caught in

the act of committing a crime; however, police often did not respect this right in practice. The law provides that detainees must be brought promptly before a magistrate; however, this frequently did not occur. Police legally may detain a person in connection with a common crime for up to 24 hours and may renew the detention three times before bringing charges; however, police occasionally exceeded these detention periods. The law permits detention without charge by administrative authorities such as governors and senior divisional officers for renewable periods of 15 days. The law also provides for access to counsel and family members; however, detainees were frequently denied access to both legal counsel and family members. The law permits bail, allows citizens the right to appeal, and provides the right to sue for unlawful arrest, but these rights were seldom exercised.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that police and gendarmes arrested persons on spurious charges on Fridays at mid-day or in the afternoon. While the law provides for judicial review of an arrest within 24 hours, the courts did not convene on weekends, so individuals arrested on a Friday typically remained in detention until Monday at the earliest. Police and gendarmes made such "Friday arrests" after accepting bribes from persons who had private grievances. There were no known cases of policemen or gendarmes being sanctioned or punished for this practice. Security forces and government authorities reportedly continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain persons, often holding them for prolonged periods without charges or trial and, at times, incommunicado. However, there were fewer such cases reported than in 2006.

During the February riots security forces arrested 1,671 persons around the country according to March figures released by the Ministry of Justice (see section 2.b.). NGOs claimed the number was higher and reported that security forces arrested scores of onlookers not directly involved in demonstrations or rioting.

For example, on February 25, Yaounde gendarmes arrested Andre Blaise Essama, a computer specialist. In a June 18 interview with *Le Messager* newspaper, Essama explained that after leaving a business meeting, his route took him close to a demonstration. He pulled out his camera and started taking pictures. Emmanuel Anyon, a plainclothes gendarme officer, stopped Essama and took him to the gendarmerie headquarters where he was interrogated and subsequently incarcerated on charges of disturbing public order and looting. On March 20, the court released Essama due to the erroneous charges. Essama filed a complaint against the two gendarme officers, but no action had been taken by year's end.

On March 1, gendarmes of the Secretariat of State for Defense used excessive force to arrest singer Joe Kameni, alias Joe La Conscience, and his friend Leon Tengue, in front of a foreign embassy in Yaounde. The two men had been on a hunger strike to protest the government's closing of Radio Equinoxe and Equinoxe TV in Douala (see section 2.a.). On March 19, the Yaounde Court of First Instance sentenced Kameni and Tengue to six months in jail for illegal assembly and demonstration. On May 20, the president granted both men amnesty as part of a larger amnesty benefitting those convicted in the wake of the February unrest.

Other high-profile arrests during the year included Mboua Massok, a political activist arrested in Douala in January disturbing public order, and Lapiro de Mbanga, a popular singer arrested in Loum, Littoral Region in April for fomenting riots and looting. The police released Massok several hours after his arrest. On September 24, the Mungo Court sentenced Lapiro (an alias for Pierre Roger Lambo Sandjo) to three years' imprisonment a 277,000 CFA (\$554,000) fine for his role in fomenting disorder and destruction of private and state property. However, his appeal trial was postponed until January 2009.

Police arbitrarily arrested persons without warrants during neighborhood sweeps for criminal and stolen goods. Citizens are required to carry identification with them at all times and police frequently arrested persons without identification during sweeps.

Prolonged pretrial detention was a serious problem. The criminal procedure code provides for a maximum of 18 months' detention before trial. However, according to

government statistics released during the year, 70 percent of the 23,000 inmates held in the country were awaiting trial. In May the Cameroon Bar Association indicated that many of these inmates had been awaiting trial for five to 10 years. The high number of pretrial detainees was due in part to the complexity of cases, staff shortages, and corruption. The bar association linked longer detention periods to a shortage of lawyers and an inadequate tracking system that resulted in frequent loss of files.

The law specifies that, after an investigation has concluded, juveniles should not be detained without trial for longer than three months. In practice the government detained juveniles for longer periods of time. In December 2007 Foyer d'Esperance, an NGO based in Yaounde, reported that several juveniles were detained in the Yaounde Central Prison for between six months and one year.

In recent years there have been reports that some prisoners were kept in prison after completing their sentences or having been released under a court ruling.

Amnesty

On May 20, President Biya granted amnesty to hundreds of persons convicted for their participation in the February riots as well as other detainees, including 74 demonstrators in Douala, 61 in Yaounde, and 36 in Bamenda. The presidential pardons did not release those detainees whose appeals were still pending at year's end.

In May the superintendents of the Yaounde and Douala prisons stated that, despite their presidential amnesty, hundreds of prisoners would remain in jail until their court fees and damages were paid.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary; however, the judiciary remained subject to executive influence, and corruption and inefficiency remained serious problems. The court system is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice. The constitution names the president as "first magistrate," thus "chief" of the judiciary and the theoretical arbiter of any sanctions against the judiciary; however, the president has not filled this role. The constitution specifies that the president is the guarantor of the legal system's independence. He also appoints all judges with the advice of the Higher Judicial Council. However, the judiciary showed modest signs of growing independence. In September the Supreme Court nullified six municipal elections conducted in November 2007, including some involving senior CPDM officials.

The court system includes the Supreme Court, a court of appeals in each of the 10 regions, and courts of first instance in each of the country's 58 divisions.

The legal system includes both national and customary law, and many criminal and civil cases can be tried using either one. Criminal cases are generally tried in statutory courts, and customary court convictions involving witchcraft are automatically transferred to the statutory courts, which act as the court of first instance. Customary law, used in rural areas, is based upon the traditions of the ethnic group predominant in the region and is adjudicated by traditional authorities of that group. Customary law is deemed valid only when it is not "repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience." However, many citizens in rural areas remained unaware of their rights under civil law and were taught that they must abide by customary laws. Customary law ostensibly provides for equal rights and status; however, men may limit women's rights regarding inheritance and employment, and some traditional legal systems treat wives as the legal property of their husbands.

Customary courts served as a primary means for settling family-related civil cases, such as in matters of succession, inheritance, and child custody. Customary courts may exercise jurisdiction in a civil case only with the consent of both parties. Either party has the right to have a case heard by a statutory court and to appeal an adverse decision

by a customary court to the statutory courts.

Military tribunals may exercise jurisdiction over civilians when the president declares martial law and in cases involving civil unrest or organized armed violence. Military tribunals also have jurisdiction over gang crimes, banditry, and highway robbery. The government interpreted these guidelines broadly and sometimes used military courts to try matters concerning dissident groups who used firearms.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for a fair public hearing in which the defendant is presumed innocent. There is no jury system. Defendants have the right to be present and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner. Defendants generally were allowed to question witnesses and to present witnesses and evidence on their own behalf. Defendants also had access to government-held evidence relevant to their cases. Because appointed attorneys received little compensation, the quality of legal representation for indigent clients often was poor. The bar association and some voluntary organizations, such as the Cameroonian Association of Female Jurists, offered free assistance in some cases. Defendants could appeal their cases.

Lawyers and human rights organizations observed several violations of the criminal procedure code in the government's response to the February unrest. Some detainees in police or gendarmerie cells did not receive medical assistance or access to an attorney. Jean de Dieu Momo, a human rights lawyer, and ACAT representative Madeleine Afite publically denounced these violations. Afite stated that arrested minors received no assistance from their parents, attorneys, or human rights organizations, as is mandated by the code.

Judges tried persons en masse, while the law provides for individual trials.

For example, on March 3, the Douala-Ndokoti First Instance Court tried dozens of young men with no legal representation. No lawyer assisted any of the defendants. Informed of the situation by lawyers who were in the court house for other matters, Charles Tchoungang, chairman of the Cameroon Bar Association, demanded that the trials be suspended until the bar association could commit lawyers to assist them. The judge agreed to adjourn the trial, which resumed the following day with proper representation.

On March 4, police detained 155 youth for allegedly participating in the February riots and brought them before the Douala Court of First Instance dirty and dressed only in their underwear. Their lawyers, including human rights lawyer Alice Nkom, stated that the defendants had endured beatings and humiliating treatment while in custody. In response to the lawyers' protests, the presiding magistrate ordered that the defendants be dressed before the trial could begin. These individuals benefitted from President Biya's May 20 amnesty.

Corruption also marked some of the trials. According to several press reports, judicial authorities accepted illegal payments from detainees' families in exchange for a reduction in sentence or the outright release of their relatives, including juveniles. Political bias by judges (often instructed by the government) frequently stopped trials or resulted in an extremely long process with extended court recesses. Many powerful political or business interests enjoyed virtual immunity from prosecution and some politically sensitive cases were settled through bribes.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of political detainees, which included anglophone citizens advocating secession through an illegal organization.

During the year the government continued to detain two individuals widely considered by human rights NGOs to be political prisoners because of irregularities in their trials

and restricted access to counsel. Titus Edzoa, former minister of health and long-time aide to President Biya, and Michel Thierry Atangana, Edzoa's 1997 campaign manager, were arrested in 1997, three months after Edzoa resigned from government and launched his candidacy for president. They were convicted on charges of embezzling public funds and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The constitution and law provide for an independent civil judiciary; however, the judiciary remained subject to executive influence, and corruption and inefficiency remained serious problems.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit such actions; however, these rights were subject to the "higher interests of the state," and there were credible reports that police and gendarmes harassed citizens, conducted searches without warrants, and opened or seized mail with impunity. The government continued to keep some opposition activists and dissidents under surveillance. Police sometimes detained family members and neighbors of criminal suspects.

The law permits a police officer to enter a private home during daylight hours without a warrant if he is pursuing a criminal suspected of committing a crime. A police officer may enter a private home at any time in pursuit of a criminal observed committing a crime.

During the year police put the houses of Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) officials and activists under surveillance, searched the houses of some SCNC leaders, and disrupted SCNC meetings in private residences. The SCNC is an anglophone group the government considers illegal because it advocates secession.

A prominent human rights organization in Yaounde also reported that security forces ransacked its offices during the February unrest.

An administrative authority may authorize police to conduct neighborhood sweeps without warrants. Such sweeps at times involved forced entry into homes in search of suspected criminals or stolen or illegal goods. Security forces sometimes sealed off a neighborhood, systematically searched homes, arrested persons, sometimes arbitrarily, and seized suspicious or illegal articles. In December security forces conducted sweeps in the Douala neighborhoods of Akwa and Douala III (Logbaba). During the operation, they seized stolen equipment including electrical and telephone wires stolen from public installations and arrested suspects.

Citizens without ID cards were detained until their identity could be established and then released. Several complained that police arbitrarily seized electronic devices and cell phones. Some registered their complaints with the police. Following the December raids in Douala, several persons who were arrested or whose houses were searched publicly complained about the motives of the security forces.

There continued to be accusations, particularly in the North and Far North regions, that traditional chiefs arbitrarily evicted persons from their land. In June in Bogo, Diamare Division, Far North Region, a villager filed a complaint to a local human rights NGO about the traditional ruler who seized his land. There was no further development by year's end.

2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the government

continued to restrict these rights in practice. The government arbitrarily arrested and detained journalists. Senior members of the government and the CPDM used their positions to harass journalists and encourage their arrest and detention. The government enforced media regulations irregularly, often implementing arduous requirements selectively to regime critics. This often created an environment of self-censorship for journalists and media outlets. Government officials used expansive libel laws to persecute journalists who criticized them.

On September 4, Michel Mombio, editor of the independent newspaper *L'Ouest Republicain* was arrested in Bafoussam and charged with fraud, attempted blackmail, and libel after he wrote an article criticizing cabinet officials. Mombio was held incommunicado for two days and transferred without hearing to Yaounde, where he awaited trial at year's end. Police arrested at least three other journalists reporting on high level corruption during the year and detained them under similar circumstances.

Individuals generally were able to criticize the government publicly and privately without being subjected to government reprisal. However, there were numerous examples where government officials threatened, harassed, or denied equal treatment to individuals or organizations who criticized government policies or expressed views at odds with government policy.

For example, human rights activist Madeleine Afite reported threats from officials and anonymous callers in response to her assessment that more fatalities occurred during the February riots and subsequent government crackdown than the government acknowledged.

In March the youth organization Conseil Patriotique et Populaire de la Jeunesse (CPPJ) received threatening calls from military officials after releasing a statement asking government to address the socio-political issues underlying the February unrest. Security officials held incommunicado at least one CPPJ member who had signed the statement. The individual was subsequently released without charges.

The government published the daily newspaper the *Cameroon Tribune*. The newspaper did not report extensively on protests or political parties critical of the government, overtly criticize the ruling party, or portray government programs in an unfavorable light.

During the year approximately 200 privately owned newspapers were published; however, most appeared irregularly, primarily due to lack of funding. Only an estimated 25 were published on a regular basis. Newspapers were distributed primarily in urban areas, and most continued to criticize the government and report on controversial issues, including corruption, human rights abuses, homosexuality, and economic policies.

The government continued to disburse official funds to support private press outlets during the year. According to media reports, the government awarded funding selectively to outlets that were less critical of the government and with instructions to provide reporting favorable to the regime.

The government interfered with private broadcast, print, and radio media during the year.

Journalists were more subject to arrest, harassment, and intimidation than in the previous year. For example, security forces in the wake of the February unrest, acting under the command of local provincial government officials, restricted press freedom by arresting, detaining, physically abusing, threatening, and otherwise harassing journalists.

On February 12, gendarmes of Zoetele arrested Jean-Bosco Talla, the publisher of *Le Front*, a Yaounde biweekly newspaper, and his colleague Simon Djomo. Talla and Djomo were reporting on the unusual wealth of senior government officials from Zoetele when gendarmes bound and blindfolded them. Gendarmes secretly moved Talla and Djomo

from Zoetele to Douala and back to Zoetele without charges or allowing them to contact a lawyer or family for approximately 24 hours. Gendarmes subsequently released them without charges.

On March 3, security forces in Yaounde who were reportedly members of Military Security (SEMIL) arrested Jacques Blaise Mvie, the publisher of *La Nouvelle Presse* newspaper. The same day the newspaper published an article on an alleged coup attempt and cited Minister of Defense Remy Ze Meka. Following his release three days later, Mvie alleged that Ze Meka had ordered the arrest. On March 6, SEMIL arrested Mvie again and interrogated him for several hours. The director of SEMIL told reporters that the rearrest was a normal procedure because Mvie incriminated them when he stated that SEMIL originally arrested him. SEMIL subsequently released Mvie, and no charges were filed by year's end.

On September 9, the independent daily newspaper *La Nouvelle Expression* reported that gendarmes apprehended and detained Michel Mombio on September 4 after his newspaper, *L'Ouest Republicain*, printed articles critical of Madeleine Tchunte, the minister of scientific research and innovation, and Jacques Fame Ndongo, the minister of higher education. Police transferred Mombio to Yaounde, where he remained in prison at year's end, awaiting trial scheduled for early 2009.

Radio remained the most important medium reaching most citizens. There were approximately 70 privately owned unofficial radio stations operating in the country, three-fourths of them in Yaounde and Douala. The state-owned CRTV broadcasts on both television and radio. In August 2007 the government issued the first licenses to two private televisions, STV and Canal 2 International, one private radio, Sweet FM, and one cable television network, TV+. The government levied taxes to finance CRTV programming, which allowed CRTV a distinct advantage over independent broadcasters.

The government required nonprofit rural radio stations to submit an application to broadcast, but they were exempt from paying licensing fees. Potential commercial radio and television broadcasters must submit a licensing application and pay an application fee when the application is submitted. Once the license is issued, stations must then pay an annual licensing fee, which was expensive for some stations. Although the government did not issue new broadcast licenses during the year, companies operated without them.

On February 21, the minister of communication indefinitely suspended broadcasts by Radio Equinoxe and Equinoxe TV, two Douala-based media outlets belonging to the same independent media group. Officially, the minister discontinued the broadcasts because the owners had failed to pay the broadcasting licenses fee. However, most broadcast stations defaulted on these payments and continued to operate legally. National and international observers concluded that the suspensions were politically motivated because the two outlets broadcast critical views of President Biya's removal of constitutional term limits. On July 4, the minister lifted the suspension after the stations had paid 40 million CFA (\$80,000) of the required 100 million CFA (\$200,000) fees.

On February 28, in an attempt to impose content restrictions, Minister of Communication Jean-Pierre Biyiti Bi Essam urged the owners of electronic media to use an "appeasement tone" in their coverage of the riots. On the same day, the broadcast of "Magic Attitude," a popular daily interactive program of the Yaounde-based Magic FM (a partner of the Voice of America), was suspended. Gendarmes raided the premises of the station without a warrant, interrupted programs, and removed all broadcasting equipment. The media reported that the raid was illegal because the minister of communication had not taken action against Magic FM, and the minister of defense (who commands gendarmes) had not authorized the raids. On July 4, the minister of communication lifted the ban; however, the seized equipment was never returned.

Unlike in the previous year, the National Communications Council, whose members were appointed by the president to review broadcasting license applications, did not meet. In

addition, an official suspended the technical committee that reviews license applications and stated that it would not reconvene until the government reopened the previously closed media outlets. Several low-power, rural community radio stations functioned with funding from the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and foreign countries. The government prohibited these stations from discussing politics.

The law permits broadcasting by foreign news services but requires them to partner with a national station. The BBC, Radio France International, and Africa1 broadcast in partnership with CRTV.

Television had lower levels of penetration than print media but was more influential in shaping public opinion. The government closed Radio Equinox for its harsh criticism of the regime. The other five independent television stations skirted criticism of the government, although their news broadcasts sometimes focused on poverty, unemployment, and poor education, pointing to the role of government neglect and corruption.

During the year CRTV management continued to instruct staff to ensure that government views prevailed at all times during their coverage.

The government was the largest advertiser in the country. Some private media enterprises reported that government officials used the promise of advertising (or the threat of withholding it) to influence reporting of the government's activities.

The government and government officials used strict libel laws to suppress criticism. These laws authorize the government, at its discretion and the request of the plaintiff, to criminalize a civil libel suit or to initiate a criminal libel suit in cases of alleged libel against the president and other high government officials; such crimes are punishable by prison terms and heavy fines. The libel law places the burden of proof on the defendant. Government officials abused this law to keep local journalists from reporting on corruption and abusive behavior. In 2006 various government members and senior government officials filed nine libel suits against journalists. During the year seven government officials filed libel suits against journalists.

On June 7, the International Federation of Journalists asked the government to stop intimidating journalists, especially those covering corruption scandals.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. The Internet was available and used by citizens, although access was limited by cost and slow connections.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

Although there were no legal restrictions on academic freedom, state security informants reportedly operated on university campuses. Professors said that participation in opposition political parties or public discussion of politics critical of the government could adversely affect their professional opportunities and advancement.

Security officials harassed musical entertainers during the year for singing songs that were derogatory to government officials.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The law provides for freedom of assembly; however, the government restricted this right in practice, particularly during and after the February demonstrations and riots.

The law requires organizers of public meetings, demonstrations, or processions to notify officials in advance but does not require prior government approval of public assemblies and does not authorize the government to suppress public assemblies that it has not approved in advance. However, officials routinely asserted that the law implicitly authorizes the government to grant or deny permission for public assembly. Consequently, the government often did not grant permits for assemblies organized by persons or groups critical of the government and used force to suppress public assemblies for which it had not issued permits.

Authorities refused to grant the SCNC permission to hold rallies and meetings, and security forces arrested and detained some activists.

Security forces forcibly disrupted the demonstrations, meetings, and rallies of citizens, trade unions, and groups of political activists throughout the year; demonstrators were injured, arrested, and killed.

On December 10, police forces confronted a group who had gathered in front of the Yaounde headquarters of l'Association Citoyenne de Defense des Interets (ACDIC). They arrested ADCIC President Bernard Njonga and at least a dozen other individuals. Police injured Theophile Nono and he required medical attention due to a head laceration. The police justified their actions by stating that ADCIC had not received approval for a gathering and that the gathering blocked a public street. Njonga was released on bail and was scheduled to appear in court in on charges of disturbing public order and conducting an unauthorized rally the following month.

On January 15, Fai Yengo Francis, the governor of Littoral Region, banned any public rallies and demonstrations in the region. The governor used the preservation of public order as a justification for his decision. Local and international observers claimed that the ban prevented opposition parties and anticonstitutional reform activists from exercising their rights. The ban was not applied to public events in support of the government and CPDM. Due to public criticism, the governor lifted the ban on July 29.

On January 19, the Sous-Prefet of Dschang, in the West Region, banned a rally organized by the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon, an opposition party, to commemorate the 37th anniversary of the death of one of its major leaders.

On February 13, in the Bessengue neighborhood the Douala GMI disrupted an SDF march to protest against constitutional reform. The police used water cannon, trucks, and tear gas to disperse demonstrators in addition to beatings with rubber batons.

During the February riots, which spread to 31 localities including Yaounde and Douala, and the subsequent government crackdown, security forces shot and killed demonstrators and rioters. While the government reported 40 persons killed, NGOs such as La Maison des Droits de l'Homme claimed that security forces killed over 100 persons.

For example, on February 23, Douala police shot and killed Lovet Ndimba Tingha, a meat vendor, while police attacked a crowd gathered for a march organized by the SDF leading opposition party. The march protested President Biya's intention to remove constitutional term limits. The press reported that SDF organizers had decided to disband for fear of violence and that police attacked while the crowd dispersed. Human rights organizations assisted Tingha's family in filing a complaint against the police; no further information was available at year's end.

On February 26, GMI police officers in Bafoussam, West Region, responding to a violent demonstration, shot and killed 23-year-old Emanuel Tantoh. Human rights NGOs assisted Tantoh's family in filing a complaint against the police; however, no other information was available by year's end.

No action was taken against security forces responsible for deaths and injuries as a result of the forcible dispersion of demonstrators in 2006 or 2007.

There were no new developments in the September 2007 case in which a senior divisional officer and his deputy reportedly shot and killed high school students Jean Jores Shimpe Pougou Zok and Marcel Bertrand Mvogo Awono in Abong-Mbang, East Region during a demonstration against a four-month absence of electricity in the town. The government promised an investigation.

The trial continued during the year in the 2006 case of four leaders of the Association for the Defense of Students' Interests, who were charged with rebellion and disturbance of public order.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, but the government limited this right in practice.

The conditions for government recognition of political parties, NGOs, or associations are arduous, interminable, and unevenly enforced. The process forced most associations to operate in uncertainty, in which their activities were tolerated but not formally approved.

The law prohibits organizations who advocate for any type of secession, leading government officials to disrupt meetings of the SCNC on the grounds that the purpose of the organization rendered their meetings illegal.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice.

The practice of witchcraft is a criminal offense under the law; however, individuals generally were prosecuted for this offense only in conjunction with another offense, such as murder. Witchcraft traditionally has been a common explanation for diseases of unknown cause.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The Jewish community was very small, and there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2008 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, security forces routinely impeded domestic and international travel during the year.

In the wake of the February riots, roadblocks and checkpoints manned by security forces proliferated in cities and on most highways, where extortion of small bribes and harassment were commonplace. Police frequently stopped travelers to check identification documents, vehicle registrations, and tax receipts as security and immigration control measures. However, there were credible reports that police arrested and beat individuals who failed to carry their identification cards as required by law.

Foreign travel is generally respected. However, there was at least one case of foreign

travel restriction.

On March 2, DGRE officers arrested SDF parliamentarian Jean Michel Nintcheu from Littoral Region at the Douala International Airport, while he was about to travel to France. Despite Nintcheu's parliamentary immunity, the DGRE officers confiscated his passport but released him after an hour of detention and without any formal charges. On June 10, officials returned Nintcheu's passport to him.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not use it; however, some human rights monitors and political opponents who had departed the country because considered themselves threatened by the government remained outside of the country, declaring themselves to be in political exile.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Approximately 100 persons had not returned home due to previous violence between the Bali and Bawock ethnic groups over land disputes and as a result of an attack by the Oku tribe on the Mbessa tribe.

In 2005 between 10,000 and 15,000 citizens in and around the Adamaoua Region villages of Djohong and Ngaoui were displaced following attacks and looting by unidentified armed groups from the Central African Republic (CAR). Officials from the Adamaoua Region administration reported that hundreds of IDPs remained.

During the year the government worked with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to protect and assist IDPs.

Protection of Refugees

The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, and the government has established a system of providing protection to refugees. The government granted refugee status or asylum. In practice the government provided protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened.

The government also provided temporary protection to certain individuals who did not qualify as refugees under the 1951 convention and its 1967 protocol. However, some noncitizens claimed that refugee status was denied to long-term residents. At year's end the UNHCR estimated that the country provided temporary protection to approximately 82,000 refugees, of which 62,000 came from CAR, 12,000 were urban refugees (9,000 in Yaounde and 3,000 in Douala), 4,500 from Chad, and 2,500 from Nigeria.

The government cooperated with the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and asylum seekers. During the year the government facilitated entry and provided assistance to some refugees from CAR and Chad.

3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The law provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully; however, President Biya's and the CPDM party controlled the political process, including the judiciary and agencies responsible for the conduct and oversight of elections. Electoral intimidation, manipulation, and fraud limited the ability of citizens to exercise this right in past elections. In April the National Assembly passed a constitutional amendment that removed presidential term limits and added provisions for presidential immunity. While considerable national discussion of the proposal ensued, the National Assembly ultimately passed the revisions in a manner that allowed no debate and underscored the CPDM's unfettered control of all government branches. Neither the electorate nor their elected representatives had an opportunity to affect the outcome of the constitutional exercise.

Elections and Political Participation

In July 2007 legislative elections, observers witnessed poor supervision at the polling stations and lax application of the electoral law. An unnecessarily complex registration process effectively disenfranchised some voters. The government failed to implement some electoral improvements it had previously committed. For example, despite repeated public assurances, the government was unable to provide indelible ink – an internationally recognized safeguard against multiple voting – to many polling stations. Despite efforts to computerize voter registration, the lists still included numerous errors.

The Supreme Court received over 130 complaints from political parties after the elections, but disqualified the majority of them on technical grounds. However, the court ordered new elections in five constituencies for 17 parliamentary seats, which were held in 2007; the CPDM won 13 seats and opposition parties four. Observers noted some irregularities and low voter turnout.

In July the government's National Elections Observatory published its assessment of the 2007 legislative and municipal elections. The report cited shortcomings due to lack of coordination between the various electoral commissions and a lack of clear and uniform procedures for the various stages of the electoral process (especially the registration process).

In 2004 President Biya, who has controlled the government since 1982, was reelected with approximately 70 percent of the vote in an election widely viewed as more free and fair than previous elections. Although the election was poorly managed and marred by irregularities, in particular in the voting registration process, most international observers agreed that it reflected the will of the voters. The Commonwealth Observer Group, however, maintained that the election lacked credibility.

During its June electoral session, the National Assembly passed an amendment to the law that created Elections Cameroon, extending the deadline for the electoral body's creation from June to December.

Membership in the ruling political party conveyed significant advantages, including in the allocation of key jobs in parastatals and the civil service. The president appoints all ministers, including the prime minister, and also directly appoints the governors of each of the 10 regions. The president has the power to appoint important lower level members of the 58 regional administrative structures as well. Onerous requirements for registration of parties and candidates restricted political activity.

The right of citizens to choose their local governments remained circumscribed. The government greatly increased the number of municipalities run by presidentially appointed delegates, who have authority over elected mayors, effectively disenfranchising the residents of those localities. Delegate-run cities included most of the provincial capitals and some division capitals in pro-opposition regions; however, this practice was almost nonexistent in the southern regions, which tended to support the ruling CPDM party. In municipalities with elected mayors, local autonomy was limited since elected local governments relied on the central government for most of their revenue and administrative personnel.

There were more than 180 registered political parties in the country. Fewer than 10, however, had significant levels of support, and only five had seats in the National Assembly. The ruling CPDM held an absolute majority in the National Assembly; opposition parties included the SDF, based in the anglophone regions and some major cities. The largest of the other opposition parties were the National Union for Democracy and Progress, the Cameroon Democratic Union, and the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon.

On numerous occasions throughout the year, authorities refused to grant permission to hold rallies and meetings to individuals or organization who espoused views at odds with government policy. In response to growing public dissatisfaction to the proposed

constitutional amendment, Littoral Region Governor Francis Fai Yengo banned public demonstrations or events. While officials enforced the ban for civil society and opposition groups, progovernment and pro-CPDM events were permitted to take place. For example, both NGOs l'Association Citoyenne de Defense des Interests and Nouveaux Droits de l' Homme were banned from holding public events to protest government actions during the year.

The government considered the SCNC illegal because it advocates secession and authorities refused to register it as a political organization. During the year security forces preemptively arrested approximately 40 leaders, members, and supporters of the SCNC to prevent them from participating in unauthorized political meetings.

For example, on February 9, Bamenda police preemptively arrested 19 SCNC activists gathered in a private residence. Police arrested the activists to prevent them from celebrating the Day of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization. On February 13, the Bamenda prosecutor released them on bail, pending formal charges and eventual trial.

In accordance with the provisions of the newly instituted penal code, officials released, pending trial, individuals who were detained for participating in illegal gatherings of the SCNC.

Women held 23 of 180 seats in the National Assembly, six of 61 cabinet posts, and a few of the higher offices within the major political parties, including the ruling CPDM.

Pygmies were not represented in the National Assembly or the higher offices of government.

Government Corruption and Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption; however, the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. The World Bank's worldwide governance indicators reflected that corruption was a severe problem. The public perception was that judicial and administrative officials were open to bribes in almost all situations. Corruption was pervasive at all levels of government.

There were publicized prosecutions of government officials accused of corruption during the year. For example, the government sanctioned dozens of government employees for corruption and mismanagement.

On March 12, police arrested and detained Paulin Abono Moampamb, a former secretary of state and mayor of Yokadouma, a small town in East Region, for embezzlement of public funds. Moampamb was placed in pretrial detention, awaiting trial at year's end.

On March 31, police arrested and detained Polycarpe Abah Abah, a former minister of finance, and Urbain Olanguena Awono, a former minister of public health, for embezzlement. The two men were placed in pretrial detention, awaiting trial at year's end.

On August 1, police arrested and detained Jean Marie Atangana Mebara, a former minister of state and secretary general of the presidency, for corruption and embezzlement. Mebara was in detention awaiting trial at year's end.

There were new developments in the following high profile corruption cases.

On July 11, the Yaounde High Court sentenced Joseph Edou, the general manager of Credit Foncier, a real estate funding company, and Andre Boto'o a Ngon, the former board chairman of the company, to 40 years' imprisonment each for corruption. Twenty-one other former Credit Foncier employees were found guilty and given prison terms

ranging from one to 45 years' imprisonment. The court also sentenced the 23 to pay 8.5 billion CFA (\$17 million) and ordered the confiscation of their property.

On April 16, the Yaounde Court of Appeals reduced the prison sentence of Gerard Ondo Ndong, former general manager of FEICOM (a parastatal providing project finance to municipalities) from 50 to 20 years' imprisonment. The court also reduced the prison terms of three of his codefendants from 48 to 20 years' imprisonment.

The constitution and law require senior government officials, including members of the cabinet, to declare their assets; however the president had not issued the requisite decree by year's end.

There are no laws providing citizens with access to government information, and such access was difficult to obtain. Most government documents, such as statistics, letters exchanged between various administrations, draft legislation, and investigation reports, were not available to the public or the media.

4. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing findings on human rights cases; however, government officials repeatedly impeded the effectiveness of local human rights NGOs during the year by harassing their members, limiting access to prisoners, refusing to share information, threatening violence, and using violence against NGO personnel.

Despite these restrictions, numerous independent, domestic human rights NGOs operated in the country, including the National League for Human Rights, the Organization for Human Rights and Freedoms, the Association of Women against Violence, the Movement for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, and the Cameroonian Association of Female Jurists. The government collaborated with domestic NGOs to address child labor, women's rights, and trafficking in persons.

On February 16, the Douala antiriot police arrested, beat, dragged on the floor, and stripped naked Aicha Ngo Eheg, a human rights activist with "Cri des Femmes," a Douala-based human rights group. Ngo Eheg, along with other demonstrators, had gathered in the Douala neighborhood of Bepanda to march against constitutional reform. According to Ngo Eheg's public statement, the police targeted her because she tried to stop them from harassing a young demonstrator. At year's end Ngo Eheg had not decided whether to file a complaint against the police.

The government cooperated with international governmental organizations and permitted visits by UN representatives and other organizations such as the ICRC. In July Prime Minister Inoni met with representatives from Human Rights Watch and other international NGOs.

While the NCHRF remained hampered by a shortage of funds, during the year it conducted a number of investigations into human rights abuses, visited prisons, and organized several human rights seminars for judicial officials, security personnel, and other government officers. Although the commission infrequently criticized the government's human rights abuses publicly, its staff intervened with government officials in specific cases of human rights abuses by security forces. During the year the NCHRF continued its efforts to stop "Friday arrests" (the practice of detaining individuals on Friday to prolong the time before court appearance) and sought to obtain medical attention for jailed suspects. Government officials also attended several seminars organized by the commission. On February 5, the NCHRF launched its Web site, which provides information about the commission and its activities. In 2006 the president signed a decree appointing members to the commission and dismissing all incumbents except the chairman.

The National Assembly's Constitutional Laws, Human Rights and Freedoms, Justice, Legislation, Regulations, and Administration Committee is charged with reviewing any human rights related legislation the government submits for consideration. The government did not submit any such bills during the year.

The Ministry of Justice published its own 2007 human rights report during the year which focused primarily on enumerating government actions to address human rights issues, such as judicial and disciplinary action taken against corrupt officials.

5. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law does not explicitly forbid discrimination based on race, language, or social status, but does prohibit discrimination based on gender and mandates that "everyone has equal rights and obligations." The government, however, did not enforce these provisions effectively. Violence and discrimination against women, trafficking in persons, and discrimination against ethnic minorities and homosexuals were problems.

Women

The law prohibits rape, although police and the courts rarely investigated and prosecuted rape cases. The media reported at least seven rape cases during the year, although no one was arrested. Due to social taboos associated with sexual violence, many rapes likely went unreported.

A 2005 survey cited by the *Cameroon Tribune* indicated that 39 percent of women living with a man (married or unmarried) were victims of physical violence, and 28 percent were victims of psychological violence. The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, although assault is prohibited and is punishable by prison terms and fines. Women's rights advocates asserted that penalties for domestic violence were insufficient. Spousal abuse is not a legal ground for divorce.

Unlike in the previous year, NGOs did not lead public awareness campaigns to combat breast ironing during the year, a practice conducted by female family members.

While the law prohibits prostitution, it was tolerated and practiced predominantly in urban areas and places frequented by tourists.

In June 2007 the government signed the Anti-Sex Tourism Charter, which provides ethical guidelines for the tourism industry.

While the law prohibits sexual harassment, very few cases were reported or prosecuted during the year. The government did not conduct any public education campaigns on the subject and there were no statistics available on its occurrence.

Despite constitutional provisions recognizing women's rights, women did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. Some points of civil law were prejudicial to women.

The law allows a husband to oppose his wife's right to work in a separate profession if the protest is made in the interest of the household and the family; a husband may also end his wife's commercial activity by notifying the clerk of the commerce tribunal of his opposition based upon the family's interest.

Customary law is far more discriminatory against women, since in many regions a woman traditionally was regarded as the property of her husband. Because of the importance attached to customs and traditions, civil laws protecting women often are not respected.

Children

During the year the government made some efforts to protect children's rights and

welfare, including participation in seminars on children's rights. During the year the minister of social affairs and other senior leaders made statements and presented government action plans regarding the improvement of the condition for children.

The law provides for a child's right to education, and schooling was mandatory through the age of 14 and free in public primary schools. Since parents had to pay uniform and book fees for primary school, and because tuition and other fees for secondary education remained costly, education was largely unaffordable for many children. The government took measures during the year to improve access to schools, such as the construction of new classrooms and the recruitment of new teachers, and provision of water fountains.

According to 2005 government statistics, 72 percent of girls between the ages of six and 14 were enrolled in school, compared to 81.3 percent of boys in the same age group. According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the secondary school enrollment ratio (gross) was 36 percent for boys and 29 percent for girls. The low education rate continued to be attributed to high costs, socio-cultural prejudices, early marriage, sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancy, and domestic chores.

The extent of child abuse was not known, although children's rights organizations targeted the problem. Newspaper reports often cited children as victims of kidnapping, mutilation, and even infanticide.

There were several credible stories of mothers (usually young, unemployed, and unmarried) abandoning their newborns in streets, garbage cans, and pit toilets.

The law does not prohibit FGM, which was practiced in isolated areas of the Far North, East, and Southwest regions.

Internal migration contributed to the spread of FGM to different parts of the country. The majority of FGM procedures were clitorectomies. The severest form of FGM, infibulation, was performed in the Kajifu region of the Southwest Region. FGM usually was practiced on infants and preadolescent girls. Public health centers in areas where FGM is frequently practiced counseled women about the harmful consequences of FGM; however, the government did not prosecute any persons charged with performing FGM.

On February 6, during the first International Day against Female Genital Mutilation, the minister of women's empowerment and the family condemned the practice and called on all citizens to join the fight against FGM.

While the minimum legal age for a woman to marry is 15, many families facilitated the marriage of young girls by the age of 12. Early marriage was prevalent in the northern regions of Far North, Adamaoua, North, and particularly the remote Far North Region, where many girls as young as nine faced severe health risks from pregnancies. There were no statistics on the prevalence of child marriage.

Although exact numbers were unavailable, the country had a significant number of displaced or street children, most of whom resided in urban areas such as Yaounde and Douala.

Beginning in January the Ministry of Social Affairs, in association with communities and various councils, established the "Project to Fight the Phenomenon of Enfants De la Rue (EDR)". The program gathered information on the phenomenon, offered psychosocial care, and bolstered the intake capacities of specialized centers. On April 9, in Maroua, Far North Region, the Ministry of Social Affairs launched the pilot phase of EDR. On April 14, the ministry also launched the program in Douala, for the Littoral and South West regions. The ministry reported that approximately 2,000 children lived in the streets of the major urban centers of the country. In April and May, a census conducted in Yaounde and Douala showed that 155 street children lived in Yaounde, and 280 street children lived in Douala. On May 14, the Minister of Social Affairs launched the operation

designed to return 150 children to their families. On December 30, she revealed that the operation made it possible for 119 out of the 435 children identified in Yaounde and Douala to return home.

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit all forms of trafficking in persons, and there were reports that persons were trafficked to, from, and within the country. The law criminalizes child trafficking and slavery and prohibits prostitution, forced labor, and other crimes related to trafficking in persons.

A 2000 International Labor Organization (ILO) study conducted in Yaounde, Douala, and Bamenda, reported that trafficking accounted for 84 percent of child laborers in those three cities. Local NGOs believed this statistic was still accurate. In most cases, intermediaries presented themselves as businessmen, approaching parents with large families or custodians of orphans and promising to assist the child with education or professional training. The intermediary paid parents an average of 6,000 CFA (\$12) before transporting the child to a city where the intermediary would subject the child to forced labor with little remuneration. In four out of 10 cases, the child was a foreigner transported to the country for labor. The report also indicated that the country was a transit site for regional traffickers, who transported children from Nigeria, Benin, Niger, Chad, Togo, the Republic of the Congo, and the CAR for indentured or domestic servitude, farm labor, and sexual exploitation. Citizens also were trafficked to South Africa.

Women and children traditionally have faced the greatest risk of trafficking generally for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Most trafficking in children occurred within the country's borders, while most trafficked women were transported out of the country. According to anecdotal evidence from the NCHRF, women often were "hired" into hubs of prostitution, often in Europe. The method for trafficking women usually involved a marriage proposition by a foreign businessman. Women were often inducted into servitude upon arrival at a foreign destination. Credible reports indicated that traffickers used trafficking victims to recruit additional victims. Girls were internally trafficked from the Adamaoua, North, Far North, and Northwest regions to Douala and Yaounde to work as domestic servants, street vendors, or prostitutes.

For example, in 2007 a local law enforcement official reported that traffickers smuggled scores of children as young as eight years old into the country from Bakassi, Nigeria for a Nigerian fisherman. There was no action taken to address the problem due to the lack of effective administrative control.

Slavery is illegal in the country and the law provides punishment of 10 to 20 years' imprisonment for persons accused of slavery or trafficking in persons. However, there were credible reports of hereditary servitude by former slaves in some chiefdoms in the North Region. For example, there were reports that the Lamido (the traditional Muslim chief) of Rey Bouba in the North Region had hereditary servants inside his compound. Although the Lamido was replaced by his son in 2004, the hereditary servants remained, reportedly by choice for cultural reasons.

The law provides that any person who engages in crimes associated with trafficking in persons shall be punished by prison terms of between six months and 20 years.

Although statistics were unavailable because traffickers could be prosecuted under various sections of the penal code, the government reportedly prosecuted trafficking cases during the year. In January gendarmerie in the North West Region arrested three traffickers transporting seven children between the ages of 12 and 17 to the Center Region to work as forced laborers. The case was pending in Bamenda at year's end.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance (MINLESI) is primarily responsible for fighting trafficking; however, the ministry was severely underfunded.

The government continued to fight trafficking through the use of an interagency committee and a program to find and return trafficked children. In addition, the government cooperated with the governments of Gabon, Nigeria, Togo, and Benin to fight trafficking through the exchange of information and preparation of common legislation on trafficking. The Interpol office in the country also played a significant role in the government's antitrafficking actions.

The government continued to work with local and international NGOs to provide temporary shelter and assistance to victims of trafficking. Catholic Relief Services worked to combat corruption in local schools that led to child prostitution. UNICEF was also actively engaged in combating girls' prostitution throughout the year.

The government continued to build awareness among local government and security officials in the areas where trafficking was an issue. Antitrafficking information or education campaigns and antitrafficking spots were broadcast on government radio and television. The government monitored immigration and emigration patterns for evidence of trafficking. Frontier police at airports, borders, and ports reported stopping many trafficking cases but did not provide details regarding specific cases.

See also the State Department's [2008 Trafficking in Persons Report](#).

Persons with Disabilities

The law provides certain rights to persons with disabilities, including access to public buildings, medical treatment, and education, and the government was obliged to provide part of the educational expense of persons with disabilities, to employ them where possible, and to provide them with public assistance when necessary. Access to public secondary education is free for persons with disabilities and children born of parents with disabilities. In practice, there were few facilities for persons with disabilities and little public assistance; lack of facilities and care for persons with mental disabilities was particularly acute. Society largely tended to treat those with disabilities as outcasts, and many felt that providing assistance was the responsibility of churches or foreign NGOs.

During the year First Lady Chantal Biya attended National Solidarity Action Day, the Ministry of Social Affairs sponsored an exhibition at the National Museum that allowed persons with disabilities to exhibit their handicrafts. For example, blind persons exhibited woven chairs.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The population consists of more than 200 ethnic groups, among which there were frequent and credible allegations of discrimination. Ethnic groups commonly gave preferential treatment to fellow ethnic group members in business and social practices. Members of the president's Beti/Bulu ethnic group from southern parts of the country held key positions and were disproportionately represented in government, state-owned businesses, the security forces, and the ruling CPDM party. For example, the minister of defense, the delegate general for national security, and the minister of communication were all from the South Region, the former two being from the same division as the president.

On July 6, in Akonolinga, Central Region, several persons were injured and killed in ethnically motivated violence. The violence occurred when a soccer team from the city of Dschang, Menoua Division, West Region, a region predominated by ethnic Bamilekes, defeated the local soccer team. Members of the Yebekolo tribe sought out and beat ethnic Bamilekes in Akonolinga. The government investigated the incident, but no one had been arrested by year's end.

There were reports during the year that Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo, a wealthy businessman with ties to the government, deceived M'Bororo women into sexual

situations, forcibly displaced the M'Bororo and seized their land and cattle, and used his money and influence with the government to order the beating and false imprisonment of members of the M'Bororo.

The commission established in 2007 to demarcate the borders between the Oku and the Mbessa tribes in both Bui and Boyo divisions in the North West Region begun during the year.

In 2007 the Bui Oku burned dozens of Mbessa houses, displacing more than 500 persons. The Oku claimed that the Mbessa were farming on their land. They also accused them of having caught and raped Oku women, a charge disputed by local authorities. Local territorial command officials reported that the investigation, although ongoing at year's end, was complicated by the allegations that traditional rulers threatened potential witnesses.

Northern areas of the country continued to suffer from ethnic tensions between the Fulani (or Peuhl) and the Kirdi. The Kirdi remained socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged relative to the Fulani in the three northern regions.

Traditional Fulani rulers, called Lamibe, continued to wield great power over their subjects, often including Kirdi, sometimes subjecting them to tithing and forced labor. Isolated cases of slavery were reported, largely Fulani enslavement of Kirdi.

Natives of the North West and South West regions tended to support the opposition party SDF and consequently suffered disproportionately from human rights abuses committed by the government and its security forces. The anglophone community was underrepresented in the public sector. Although citizens in certain francophone areas – the East, Far North, North, and Adamaoua Regions – voiced similar complaints about under-representation and government neglect, anglophones said they generally believed that they had not received a fair share of public sector goods and services within their two regions. Some residents of the anglophone region sought greater freedom, equality of opportunity, and better government by regaining regional autonomy rather than through national political reform, and have formed several quasi-political organizations in pursuit of their goals.

Police and gendarmes subjected illegal immigrants from Nigeria and Chad to harassment and imprisonment. During raids, members of the security forces extorted money from those who did not have regular residence permits or who did not have valid receipts for store merchandise. Some members of the country's large community of Nigerian immigrants complained of discrimination and abuse by government officials. Illegal immigrants were subject to harassment on some occasions, although at a lower level than in previous years.

Indigenous People

Approximately 50,000 to 100,000 Baka, Bakola, and Bagyeli (Pygmies) primarily resided (and were the earliest known inhabitants) in the forested areas of the South and East regions. While no legal discrimination exists, other groups often treated the Baka as inferior and sometimes subjected them to unfair and exploitative labor practices. Baka reportedly continued to complain that the forests they inhabit were being logged without fair compensation. Some observers believed that sustained logging was destroying the Baka's unique, forest-oriented belief system, forcing them to adapt their traditional social and economic systems to a more rigid modern society similar to their Bantu neighbors.

Local Baka along the path of the Chad-Cameroon pipeline continued to complain that they were not compensated fairly for their land or had been cheated by persons posing as Baka representatives. In 2006 the committee in charge of the follow-up on the pipeline organized an evaluation seminar to determine compensation for the Bakola and Bagyeli. The committee agreed that despite improved access to education and healthcare, much remained to be done to improve living conditions for the pygmies. No

further developments were reported during the year. On October 3, the Fondation Camerounaise d' Actions Rationalisees et de Formation sur l' Environnement conducted a study in 28 villages in the Center and South regions that confirmed the pygmies' complaints (Kribi Region) that they had not yet been fully compensated. The final conclusions of the study were not released by year's end.

An estimated 95 percent of Baka did not have national identity cards; most Baka could not afford to provide the necessary documentation to obtain national identity cards, which were required to vote in national elections. In 2004 Plan International and another NGO launched a program to educate Bakas about their political rights, which included the construction of a communal radio station in the region of Abong-Mbang in Upper Nyong Division, East region.

In 2005 the Ministry of Social Affairs launched the Project to Support the Economic and Social Development of Bakas in South Region. The mission of the three-year project was to allow the issuance of birth certificates and national identity cards to 2,300 Bakas, as well as to help register hundreds of students in school. The program was still ongoing at year's end.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Homosexual activity is illegal and punishable by a prison sentence of six months to five years and a fine ranging from 20,000 to 200,000 CFA (\$40 to \$400). While authorities did not prosecute persons under this law during the year, homosexuals suffered from harassment and extortion by law enforcement officials. False allegations of homosexuality were used to harass enemies or to extort money.

There were new developments in the August 2007 case of three homosexuals arrested by gendarmes in Douala. On January 9, the Douala High Court sentenced Lazare Baeeg, Emmanuel Balep, and Tony Dikongue to six months in jail and fines of 50,000 CFA (\$100) for homosexuality. Their lawyer appealed the decision, which was pending at year's end.

In October 2007 the Bonanjo High Court refused to release six Douala men held in New Bell Prison on charges of homosexuality. In January the judge held the first hearing on the case but adjourned it pending further discovery. There were no further developments on the case by year's end.

6. Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join trade unions; however, the government imposed numerous restrictions. The law does not permit the creation of a union that includes both public and private sector workers, or the creation of a union that includes different, even closely related, sectors.

The law requires that unions register with the government, permitting groups of no less than 20 workers to organize a union by submitting a constitution, bylaws, and nonconviction certifications for each founding member. The law provides for prison sentences and fines for workers who form a union and carry out union activities without registration. Government officials stated that the government provided union certification within one month of application; however, independent unions, especially in the public sector, have found it difficult to register. For example, the Syndicat National des Enseignants du Supérieur was not officially registered but operated without government interference.

Registered unions were subject to government interference. The government chose the unions with which it would bargain; some independent unions accused the government of creating small nonrepresentative unions amenable to government positions and with which it could negotiate more easily. Some sections of labor law have no force or effect

because the presidency has not issued implementing decrees.

The labor code explicitly recognizes workers' right to strike, but only after mandatory arbitration, and workers exercised this right during the year. During the year strikes occurred at some universities, the national railroad company (CAMRAIL), and Cameroon Postal Services. Arbitration decisions are legally binding, but often unenforceable when the parties refuse to cooperate. It was not uncommon for such decisions to be overturned or simply ignored by the government or employers. The provision of the law allowing persons to strike does not apply to civil servants, employees of the penitentiary system, or workers responsible for national security. Instead of strikes, civil servants were required to negotiate grievances directly with the minister of the appropriate department in addition to the minister of labor.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The constitution and law provide for collective bargaining between workers and management as well as between labor federations and business associations in each sector of the economy.

When labor disputes arose, the government chose the labor union with which it would negotiate, selectively excluding some labor representatives. Once agreements were negotiated, there was no mechanism to enforce implementation; some agreements between the government and labor unions were ignored by the government.

In November transport unions convened a press conference to address that the February agreements with the government had not been implemented. The Sous-prefet of Yaounde II banned the press conference and called it "illegal".

The constitution and law prohibit antiunion discrimination, and employers guilty of such discrimination were subject to fines of up to approximately one million CFA (\$2,000). However, employers found guilty were not required to compensate workers for discrimination or to reinstate fired workers. The MINLESI did not report any complaints of antiunion discrimination during the year, although there were credible press reports of harassment of union leaders.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The constitution and law prohibit forced or compulsory labor, including by children; however, there were reports that such practices occurred. Prison authorities arranged for prison inmates to be contracted out to private employers or used as communal labor for municipal public works. Money generated from these activities was usually pocketed by prison administrators and not given to detainees.

Hereditary servitude occurred in the Northern regions.

In the South and East regions, some Baka, including children, continued to be subjected to unfair and exploitative labor practices by landowners, including forced work on the landowners' farms during harvest seasons without payment.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law generally protects children from exploitation in the workplace and specifies penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment for infringement; however, child labor remained a problem. The government specifically prohibits forced and compulsory labor by children, but there were reports that it occurred in practice.

The law sets a minimum age of 14 for child employment, bans night work, and

enumerates tasks that children under the age of 18 cannot legally perform. These include moving heavy objects, dangerous and unhealthy tasks, working in confined areas, and prostitution. The law also states that a child's work day cannot exceed eight hours. Employers were required to train children between the ages of 14 and 18, and work contracts must contain a training provision for minors. The prohibition against night work was not effectively enforced.

Child labor existed chiefly in urban areas and in the informal sector such as street vending, car washing, agricultural work, and domestic service. Many urban street vendors were less than 14 years of age. Children worked as household help, and some children were involved in prostitution. In the north there were credible reports that children from needy homes were placed with other families to do household work for pay.

There were reports that some parents gave their children to "marabouts" (traditional religious figures) in Maroua in the Extreme North, to learn the Koran and prepare them to become "marabouts" themselves. However, there were reports that some children were kept in leg chains and subjected to forced labor.

Parents viewed child labor as both a tradition and a rite of passage. Relatives often employed rural youth, especially girls, as domestic helpers, and these jobs seldom allowed time for the children to attend school. In rural areas, many children began work at an early age on family farms. According to some NGOs, the cocoa industry also employed child laborers. These children originated, for the most part, from the three northern and the North West regions.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and MINLESI were responsible for enforcing existing child labor laws through site inspections of registered businesses; however, the government did not allocate sufficient resources to support an effective inspection program. Moreover, the legal prohibitions do not include family chores, which in many instances were beyond a child's capacity. In 2005 the government employed 58 general labor inspectors to investigate child labor cases.

The ILO continued to work with specific contact persons in various ministries and agencies involved in antitrafficking activities; it also conducted nationwide investigations and cooperated with local organizations.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

In June the government increased the minimum wage in all sectors to 28,246 CFA (\$56) per month. However, the minimum wage did not provide for a decent standard of living for an average worker and family. MINLESI was responsible for enforcing the minimum wage nationally.

The law establishes a standard workweek of 40 hours in public and private nonagricultural firms and 48 hours in agricultural and related activities. There are exceptions for guards and firemen (56 hours a week), service sector staff (45 hours a week), and household and restaurant staff (54 hours a week). The law mandates at least 24 consecutive hours of weekly rest. Premium pay for overtime ranges from 120 to 150 percent of the hourly pay depending on amount and whether it is for weekend or late-night overtime. There is a prohibition on excessive compulsory service. MINLESI inspectors were responsible for monitoring these standards; however, they lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program.

The government sets health and safety standards. MINLESI inspectors and occupational health physicians were responsible for monitoring these standards; however, they lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program. The law does not provide workers with the right to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardizing their continued employment.

