

The State of the World's Human Rights; Benin 2024

Rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly continued to be routinely curtailed. Opposition leaders were arbitrarily detained. Detention conditions violated international human rights standards for the treatment of prisoners. Victims of forced eviction linked to tourism development projects continued to be denied adequate compensation. Armed groups killed people at the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso.

Background

A new electoral code – denounced by the opposition – was enacted in March. The text restricted participation in the presidential election, scheduled for 2026. Despite the lifting of the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS against Niger after the 2023 coup, tensions between Benin and neighbouring Niger increased following Niger's refusal to open its borders. This led to an increase in the cost of living in Benin.

Freedom of expression

Steve Amoussou, a Beninese national, was arrested on 12 August in Lomé, Togo, where he was living. He was transferred to Benin, where he was charged by the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism with "electronic harassment, initiation and publication of false news and direct incitement to rebellion". His trial, which began on 7 October, was ongoing at the end of the year. The Beninese authorities claim that he is "Frère Hounvi", the pseudonym of a cyber activist known for his criticisms of the authorities.

The management of Benin's leading private media group, La Gazette du Golfe, announced in February the dismissal of its 200 employees after the authorities froze its bank accounts. This followed a decision on 8 August 2023 by the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC) to suspend "all means of mass communication" of the group, in connection with an alleged "glorification of a coup d'état" after comments made on the situation in Niger.

In September, the president of the HAAC threatened to suspend media outlets that do not comply with the authorities' requirements regarding terrorism-related information.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

On 26 April security forces repressed with excessive force a trade union protest against the high cost of living in Cotonou, after the prefect of the Littoral department banned it on the

grounds that no “request for authorization” had been received. Several union leaders were arrested and released the same day. On 11 May the prefect of the Littoral department authorized a similar protest in Cotonou.

On 30 December, several trade unions issued a statement denouncing the arrest the previous day of a trade union leader from Cotonou, who had called for a dockworkers’ meeting that day to discuss the deterioration in their working conditions. He was released the same day after being presented to the public prosecutor and after the dockers announced a strike.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Opposition leader Reckya Madougou remained in detention, despite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stating in 2022 that her detention was arbitrary. She was convicted in December 2021 of “complicity in acts of terrorism” and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Excessive use of force

On 27 November, the public prosecutor of the Parakou court announced the opening of an investigation and the arrest of seven police officers, after Samba Fayçal Ouorou Gani was found dead on 19 November after a police check.

Detainees’ rights

Prisoners continued to live in filthy, overcrowded cells without adequate clean water and medical treatment.¹ According to the director general of the Prison Agency, as of September there were more than 19,000 detainees in Benin’s 11 detention facilities, around 300% over capacity. Due to lack of space, most prisoners slept on the floor on their side, with no room to turn round. Most prisons were not equipped with fans, despite the excessive heat. The air in the buildings and cells was fetid due to the lack of sanitary facilities. Prisons lacked medical staff, and prisoners reported that medicine was often denied, unavailable or out of date.

In August, deputies of the National Assembly submitted several written questions to the government regarding the poor conditions in detention and excessive periods of preventive detention.

On 9 October, the president adopted a decree “on the organization and internal regime of prisons”, setting high standards for detainees’ health and hygiene.

Forced evictions

People forcibly evicted from the district of Fiyégnon in Cotonou in September 2021 in connection with tourism development projects along the coast were yet to receive adequate compensation. Residents had not been appropriately warned of the eviction or

when it was planned to take place. Most of the residents were at home when the demolition equipment arrived, and the demolitions were carried out in the rain, at night and at the start of the school year, with consequences for children's education.

Abuses by armed groups

On 16 and 17 April, an attack by unidentified gunmen on the Monkassa customs post left three people dead, including one member of the Beninese defence and security forces. On the night of 24 July, seven soldiers and five African Parks rangers were killed in W National Park, bordering Niger. In recent years, attacks by armed groups increased in border areas, attributed by the authorities to Islamic State and Al-Qaeda fighters from neighbouring countries.

