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2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cameroon is a republic dominated by a strong presidency. The president retains power over the legislative and judicial branches of government. The ruling political party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, has remained in power since its creation in 1985. The country held legislative elections in February 2020 that were marked by irregularities. The ruling party won 152 of 180 National Assembly seats. Paul Biya has served as president since 1982. He was last reelected in 2018 in an election marked by irregularities.

The national police and the national gendarmerie are responsible for internal security. The former reports to the General Delegation of National Security and the latter to the Secretariat of State for Defense in charge of the Gendarmerie. The army shares some domestic security responsibilities; it reports to the minister delegate at the presidency in charge of defense. The Rapid Intervention Battalion reports directly to the president. Civilian and military authorities did not maintain effective control over the security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed numerous abuses.

Casualties rose in the Anglophone crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. Anglophone separatists used improvised explosive devices with greater success. ISIS-West Africa increased attacks in the Far North Region. The government continued to crack down on the opposition Cameroon Renaissance Movement, and in December several of its members were sentenced to prison for terms ranging from one to seven years following protests in 2020.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government and nonstate armed groups; forced disappearances by the government; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government and nonstate armed groups; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrests or detention; political prisoners or detainees; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for offenses allegedly committed by an individual; serious abuses in a conflict, including abductions and unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers by nonstate armed groups; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media, including violence, threats of violence, or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, censorship, and criminal libel laws; substantial interference with the right of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; serious restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; lack of investigations and accountability for gender-based violence; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and the existence or use of laws criminalizing same-sex sexual conduct between adults.

Although the government took some steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, and punish officials who committed human rights abuses or corruption, it did not do so systematically and rarely held public proceedings. Impunity remained a serious problem.

Armed separatists, Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa, and criminal gangs also committed human rights abuses, some of which were investigated by the government.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were numerous reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary and unlawful killings through excessive use of force in the execution of their official duties. As in the previous year, most of the killings were associated with the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions (see also

section 1.g., Abuses in Internal Conflict).

The Ministry of Defense, through the Secretariat of State in charge of the National Gendarmerie (SED), is responsible for investigating whether killings attributed to the security forces, including police perpetrated killings, are justifiable. Prosecutions related to these matters are conducted through the Military Tribunal. In some high-profile cases, preliminary investigations are entrusted to a mixed commission of inquiry, including civilian members with relevant professional backgrounds.

On January 10, according to multiple credible sources, including Reuters, the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, Buea-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Reach Out Cameroon, and Cameroon News Agency, soldiers carried out an offensive raid in Mautu, a village in the Muyuka subdivision of the Southwest Region, killing at least nine civilians, including a child and an elderly woman, neither of whom was an affiliate of any separatist organization. Three witnesses reportedly told Reuters that soldiers raided homes and shot civilians as they ran for cover. The Southwest Region-based NGO Reach Out Cameroon identified the deceased as Takang Anyi Roger, age 20; Tambe Daniel; Shey Keisa, age six; Obenegwa David, age 30; Egoshi Lucas, age 25; Takang Bruno, age 22; Ndakam Pascal, age 22; Tambe Ann, age 50; and Ngoto Valentine Akama, age 32. Defense Ministry spokesperson Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo acknowledged in a January 11 press release soldiers from the 21st Motorized Infantry Battalion conducted a preventive operation against terrorist positions in the Mautu but did not admit that troops killed civilians. Atonfack Guemo said troops came under heavy gunfire and “adequately responded,” which resulted in the neutralization of some terrorists.

Multiple media outlets reported that on January 23, security officers killed four unarmed teenagers in the Meta Quarter neighborhood in Bamenda, Northwest Region. The victims included Sale Saddam and Aloysius Ngalim each age 16, and Blaise Fon and Nelly Mbah, both age 17. In a January 27 press release, Defense Ministry spokesperson Atonfack Guemo said soldiers of the Fifth Gendarmerie Region raided Meta Quarter to apprehend separatists who were planning an assault on a nearby police post from an abandoned building. He said the separatists opened fire on the soldiers approaching their vehicles and during the ensuing confrontation, security officers killed four separatists, wounded several others who escaped, and recovered large quantities of weapons. On January 25, the *Guardian Post* newspaper reported that local residents identified two of the boys as students at Government Bilingual High School downtown and categorically stated that the teenagers were not armed and had “nothing to do with the ongoing conflict in the Anglophone regions.”

In an August 2 report, HRW denounced abuses committed by the army and separatists in Northwest and Southwest Regions. HRW wrote that on June 8 and 9, members of the security forces killed two civilians and raped a 53-year-old woman in the Northwest Region. Survivors and witnesses reportedly told HRW that in the early hours of June 9, approximately 150 security force members from both the regular army and Rapid Intervention Battalion (French acronym: BIR) conducted an operation in and around Mbuluf village. Survivors reportedly told HRW that security forces stopped their group of six including a husband and wife, their two children, another man, and another woman in the vicinity of the village for questioning. In Mbah they released everyone except the husband of the woman who was reportedly raped. His body was reportedly found with multiple gunshot wounds on June 11 in Tatum village, approximately 18 miles from Mbah.

On June 8, at approximately 7 p.m. in Gom village in the Northwest Region, two plainclothes soldiers, whom a witness recognized as regular army members from the Gom military base, broke into the local traditional ruler’s home, known as the fon’s home, and beat a 72-year-old man. At approximately 7:30 p.m., they questioned and shot Lydia Nwang, a 60-year-old woman, in the right leg after she failed to provide information regarding a separatist fighter. The soldiers then forced the man age 72 and his wife to carry Nwang towards the Gom military base for questioning. Nwang was carried as far as a bridge approximately one mile from her house, when the soldiers shot and killed her. Nwang’s relatives recovered her body from the bridge the following morning. HRW claimed that on July 15, it emailed its findings to Defense Ministry spokesperson Atonfack Guemo requesting responses to specific questions but received no response by the time it released its findings. In an August 5 statement, Atonfack Guemo qualified the information contained in HRW’s report as false and baseless.

According to NGO Un Monde Avenir, Juste Magloire Tang Ndjock died sometime overnight between July 20 to 21, in the premises of the Gendarmerie Brigade in Pouma after authorities severely beat him. He had been summoned to the Pouma gendarmerie brigade following a complaint. After failing to appear, gendarme Marshal Okala ordered the arrest of Tang Ndjock. As of the end of the December, his remains and findings of the autopsy report had not been released to the family of the deceased.

On the night of February 13, according to multiple credible sources, a group of armed separatists carried out an attack on the Esoh Atah village in Lebialem division of the Southwest Region, killing four civilians, including the following three traditional rulers: Chief Benedict Fomin, Chief Simon Forzizong, and Chief Fualeasuoh. According to the minister delegate in charge of planning at the

Ministry of the Economy, Planning, and Regional Development, Paul Tasong, the group led by Oliver Lekeaka, also known as “Field Marshal,” stormed Essoh Atah village, pulled the chiefs from their houses, and shot and killed them at the market square before dumping their bodies near a river. Minister Tasong added that the separatists accused the chiefs of refusing to hand over proceeds from the sale of cocoa for the 2020-21 season and organizing schools in the community. Other reports suggested the separatists also accused their victims of participating in the December 2020 regional election. On July 8, the fon of Baforkum in the Northwest Region was abducted from his palace for the second time in less than 60 days sometime between July 6 and July 7 by suspected separatist fighters; on July 8, residents discovered his body dumped nearby a stream.

On June 15, separatists abducted six divisional delegates in Ekondo-Titi subdivision of the Southwest Region. On June 18, local residents discovered the body of Johnson Mabilia Modika, the divisional delegate for the Ministry of Economy, Planning, and Regional Development. HRW indicated on July 1, at approximately 7:30 p.m., two suspected separatist fighters killed Fuh Max Dang, a physics teacher at the Government Bilingual High School in Kumba, Southwest Region, after they broke into his home. A relative of the deceased reportedly told HRW that separatist fighters had previously threatened the teacher, warning him that he would face consequences if he continued teaching. As of the end of December, the status of the remaining five delegates remained unknown.

On July 14, separatists dressed in army uniforms and riding motorbikes killed two security officers at a security post in Babadjou, West Region. On July 18, according to multiple reports, separatists killed five police officers in Bali, Mezam division of the Northwest Region. The attack took place at a security checkpoint where separatists detonated an improvised explosive device near a police vehicle, after which the separatists opened fire on the occupants. In a video a group of armed men claimed responsibility for the attack and identified themselves as the “Bali Buffaloes.” On July 19, less than 24 hours after the Bali attack, a video found on social media showed separatists dismembering a security officer, Patrick Mabenga.

Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued killing civilians, including members of vigilance committees, which are organized groups of local residents cooperating with government forces in the Far North Region. On April 5, HRW reported that Boko Haram had increased attacks on civilians in towns and villages in the Far North Region since December 2020, killing at least 80 civilians. HRW documented that Boko Haram suicide bombers blew up fleeing civilians, adding that dozens of local fishermen were killed with machetes and knives, and an elderly village chief was killed in front of his family. HRW indicated that the actual number of casualties was much higher, in view of the difficulty of confirming details remotely, underscoring that some attacks often went unreported. In late July ISIS-WA carried out two attacks against the army in the Logone-et-Chari division. The first attack took place on July 24 in the locality of Sagme, in Fotokol subdivision. According to multiple accounts, eight soldiers died during the attack and 13 others were wounded. According to the NGO Stand Up for Cameroon, suspected Boko Haram affiliates killed at least 27 persons in the months of November and December.

Although the government repeatedly promised to investigate abuses committed by security forces, it did not do so transparently or systematically. Following the April 2020 release of a summary of the findings of an investigation into the February 2020 killing by security forces of an estimated 23 civilians in the village of Ngarbuh, legal proceedings against three security force members, 17 members of a vigilance committee, and one former separatist fighter, indicted on murder charges, opened at the Yaounde Military Tribunal in June, after multiple adjournments. As of the end of December, only three of the accused had appeared before the court.

b. Disappearance

As in the previous year, government security forces were believed to be responsible for enforced disappearances of suspected separatists or their supporters. Human rights lawyers documented the cases of Onyori Mukube Onyori and Ernest Mofa Ngo, whose abductions they believed were orchestrated at the behest of authorities. Following an attack on the Mother Theresa International Bilingual Academy in Kumba, Southwest Region, in November 2020 two men who were playing cards in the hallway of their house, were abducted and taken to an undisclosed location. After months of investigations, lawyers discovered in late April that they were being detained at the General Directorate for External Research (DGRE), an intelligence agency, in Yaounde. The lawyers reported Mofa Ngo was subsequently released under unclear circumstances, but Mukube remained in detention as of December.

As of December there were no developments reported on the high-profile investigation into the death of broadcast journalist Samuel Abue Adjekha, popularly known as Samuel “Wazizi.” Wazizi was detained in August 2019 after authorities accused him of having connections with armed separatists. He was transferred to a military-run facility in Buea in August 2019 and never appeared in court, despite several scheduled hearings. According to the Ministry of Defense, Wazizi died in police custody 10 days after his arrest in 2019 from severe sepsis. Although Wazizi was officially pronounced dead in June 2020, his family had yet to see or recover his remains more than one year after the official death announcement.

There were no reported developments concerning the alleged disappearance of human rights activist Franklin Mowha, the president of NGO Frontline Fighters for Citizen Interests, who disappeared after leaving his hotel room in 2018, while on a mission to monitor human rights abuses in Kumba, Southwest Region. Despite multiple calls by human rights organizations for an investigation into the disappearance, the government had not taken action more than three years later. Mowha highlighted and denounced the abuses perpetrated by persons associated with the government, and authorities had previously detained him on several occasions.

On October 13, barrister Amungwa Nde Ntso Nico, one of the lawyers for separatist leader Sisuku Julius Ayuk Tabe and 47 others arrested in connection to the Anglophone crisis in 2017, told the international community that members of government security forces had removed three of his clients, Tebid Tita, Hamlet Acheshit, and John Fongue, from Yaounde Kondengui Central Prison without official authorization and were holding them incommunicado in the Central Service for Judicial Enquiries (SCRJ) bunker. On October 15, barrister Amungwa and members of the defense team announced to the public that he had a meeting with the state prosecutor at the Yaounde Military Tribunal, who told him the detainees had been transferred to the SCRJ at the SED. Following the meeting, he said he went to the SCRJ, but the clients were not on the prisoner manifest. Amungwa later reported he had been able to visit the three, who were very ill and said they had been mistreated and forced to sign a document in the absence of their lawyer. Tita, Acheshit, and Fongue, in detention since 2017, had yet to be officially sentenced, despite multiple appearances before the Military Tribunal.

On June 15, separatists abducted six divisional delegates in Ekondo-Titi subdivision of the Southwest Region. One of the delegates was eventually killed (see also section 1.a.), and the five others remained unaccounted for as of the end of December.

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

Although the constitution and law prohibit such practices, there were reports that security force members tortured or otherwise abused citizens, including separatist fighters, their alleged supporters, and political opponents. Human rights organizations documented several cases in which security forces severely mistreated separatist fighters and others in which armed separatists mistreated civilians and members of defense forces. Public officials, or persons acting at their behest, reportedly carried out acts that resulted in severe physical, mental, and emotional trauma.

On February 13, a video emerged on social media and television news programs showing a mixed unit of government defense forces abusing a civilian. They interrogated the man in French and pidgin English, poured water on him, beat him with a machete until he fell unconscious. According to the video, authorities demanded that the man reveal the location of his brother whom they believed to be a separatist fighter. In a February 15 press release, MOD spokesperson Atonfack Guemo acknowledged that the incident took place in the afternoon of February 11 in the locality of Ndu, Donga and Mantung division of the Northwest Region. Atonfack Guemo said the victim was identified upon preliminary investigations as Jean Fai Fungong, a suspected criminal and separatist. He indicated that the minister delegate for defense, Joseph Beti Assomo, ordered the immediate arrest of two soldiers, two gendarme officers, and four police officers believed to be responsible for the abuse and placed them in detention at the Ndu Territorial Gendarmerie Brigade pending the outcome of a full investigation. As of the end of December, authorities had not released information concerning the outcome of the investigation, and there was no indication that the case had been fully investigated (see also section 1.a.).

On September 21, multiple videos depicting a civilian being beaten by gendarme officers with machetes circulated on social media. The MOD issued a press release and stated there would be a full investigation into the matter. The communique added that the perpetrators of the abuse, which took place on the overnight on September 16 at a gendarme facility in Yaounde, had been identified and would be subject to disciplinary and judicial sanctions. As of late November, the MOD had not provided an update on this case.

According to NGO Un Monde Avenir, shopkeeper Sieur Nzimou Bertin died in gendarme custody on the morning of November 18, a few hours after he was released from police custody, following a summons after a dispute with his neighbor. His death was said to be the consequence of the severe assault and degrading treatment he suffered while in detention on the evening of November 17 at the 9th quarter police station in the Littoral Region.

According to the Conduct in UN Field Missions online portal, three allegations were submitted during the year of sexual exploitation and abuse by the country's peacekeepers deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). This followed six allegations against the country's peacekeepers deployed to MINUSCA in 2020. As of the end of December, investigations by the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services into all allegations from during the year remaining pending. There were also 26 other open allegations dating from previous years of sexual exploitation and abuse by the country's peacekeepers deployed

to UN peacekeeping missions dating back to 2017. Of the open cases, eight allegedly involved rape of a child. One case allegedly involved multiple allegations: four instances of rape of a child and two instances of exploitative relationships with an adult. Another open case allegedly involved rape by two peacekeepers of two children and an exploitative relationship with an adult.

Reports from credible organizations and anecdotal evidence suggested there were cases of rape and sexual assaults perpetrated by persons associated with the government in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, as well as in other parts of the country. NGOs also indicated armed separatists sexually assaulted survivors in the two regions (see also section 1.g., Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture). On February 13, the NGO Mandela Center International issued a press release denouncing the December 2020 gang rape of a 16-year-old girl by police inspector Remy Gaetan Eba'a Ngomo and his colleagues. Police inspector Eba'a Ngomo, who was on duty at the Ntui public security police station, forced the girl and a male colleague to follow him, according to the survivors and the civil society organizations reporting on the issue. Once at the police station, the police inspector forced the two to have sex outdoors. Afterwards, Eba'a Ngomo invited his colleagues, including a person he referred to as his boss, to rape the female survivor, after chasing away the male survivor. Eba'a Ngomo gave the female survivor 1,000 CFA francs (\$2) and threatened to kill her if she revealed what had happened. The father of the female survivor unsuccessfully initiated a series of complaints starting with the head of public security police in Ntui, followed by the public prosecutor in Ntui. The father of the female survivor filed another complaint with the regional division of judicial police in Yaounde. As of early October, the case was pending before the prosecutor, while police inspector Eba'a Ngomo was reportedly in detention; however, his presence in detention was not independently confirmed as of December.

In May Reach Out Cameroon released its human rights situation and incident report for the period extending from January to March 31. In the report, Reach Out indicated that on January 21, separatist fighters attacked, robbed, and gang-raped a young woman at Nkewen, in the Bamenda III municipality in the Northwest Region. The survivor reportedly told Reach Out that she was on her way back from a party with her aunt when armed men attacked her at the entrance to her neighborhood, pulled her into a nearby bush, and raped her.

While some investigations and prosecutions were conducted and a few sanctions meted out, impunity remained a problem. Few of the reports of trials involved those in command. The General Delegation of National Security and the Secretariat of State for Defense in charge of the National Gendarmerie investigated some abuses. The government levied punitive action against convicted low-level offenders, and other investigations continued as of year's end. The trial for the four soldiers and 17 members of vigilance committees accused of assisting regular defense forces in perpetrating the February 2020 massacre in Ngaruh continued at the Yaounde Military Tribunal, but as of December, only three of the accused, all of them members of defense and security forces, had been seen in court.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, poor-quality food, gross overcrowding, physical abuse, as well as inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care.

Physical Conditions: Overcrowding remained a significant problem in most prisons, especially in major urban centers.

Officials held prisoners in dilapidated, colonial-era prisons. Authorities often held pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners in the same cells. In some cases female detainees had better conditions, including improved toilet facilities and less-crowded living quarters. Prisons generally had separate wards for men, women, and children. Authorities reported that the sick were held separately from the general prison population, but this was often not the case.

The conditions in detention cells located at gendarmerie and police units were worse. The cells were generally very narrow, and most of them lacked toilets and windows. Virtually all lacked beds. Unlike prisons that had separate wards for men, women, and children, separation of detainees by age and sex was not systematic in gendarmerie and police unit cells. Conservative estimates by the Human Rights Commission of the Cameroon Bar Association indicated the country's prisons had the capacity to accommodate 17,915 inmates. As of September, the total prison population was 31,815, representing an occupancy rate of 177 percent above the maximum inmate capacity. Prisons in the Littoral Region that had a maximum intake capacity of 1,550 had a total population of 4,639 inmates, representing an occupancy rate of 299 percent above the maximum inmate capacity as of October.

Access to food, water, sanitation, heating and ventilation, lighting, and medical care was inadequate. Consequently, malnutrition, tuberculosis, bronchitis, malaria, hepatitis, scabies, and numerous other treatable conditions, including infections, were rampant. Failure to observe minimum detention rules resulted in at least two deaths during the year. According to credible reports, including by the Mandela Center, Andre Youmbi died on April 25 at the Bafoussam Central Prison in the West Region, after 43 months of detention. Youmbi was ill and had requested treatment in an adequate health

facility. The magistrates handling his case considered the nature of the offenses of which he was the alleged perpetrator advocated against his provisional release. The West Region Court of Appeal president reportedly denied the request for provisional release on April 23. Youmbi returned to prison the same day and died two days later.

Multiple organizations reported that on May 3, Jean Louis Tiotso, who was in poor health and had been awaiting trial for illicit sale of medicines, died at the Foubot prison in the West Region. Ombouda, the prosecutor in his case, allegedly refused to release him to seek appropriate treatment as was his right under the law. Anecdotal reports suggested that Tiotso unsuccessfully attempted multiple times to appeal to the courts for treatment but failed each time. The prison administration also reportedly supported his request to no avail. Tiotso's death triggered a riot that led to the burning of the Foubot Court House and at least one additional death on May 3, according to reports.

Physical abuse by prison guards and prisoner-on-prisoner violence occurred during the year. Violence among inmates was reported in virtually all prisons. In an August 30 Facebook posting, the content of which was confirmed by Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) lawyers, a whistleblower shared the complaint of an unidentified MRC detainee. The detainee claimed that MRC detainees were assaulted in their Yaounde central prison cell by inmates at the behest of prison authorities on August 27 after the lights went off. According to the account, Henry Etchome Misse, head of the prison's disciplinary office, led a group of unidentified inmates and assaulted the MRC detainees. Misse and his men allegedly participated in the assault of MRC detainees, some of whom had their money stolen along with other valuables.

Administration: Authorities allegedly did not address all credible allegations of mistreatment. MRC detainees, for instance, claimed they had been assaulted on multiple occasions in their prison cells by other prisoners, but they reported that prison officials were indifferent, giving them no opportunity to express their complaints. Visitors needed formal authorization from the state counsel to communicate with inmates; without authorization, visitors had to bribe prison staff to communicate with inmates. While overall prison visits continued to be limited in compliance with COVID-19-pandemic-related restrictions, political detainees reportedly suffered tougher restrictions.

Independent Monitoring: Independent monitoring of prisons was constrained by COVID-19-pandemic-related restrictions. Diplomatic missions were granted access to visit their nationals; the government denied human rights groups the ability to review prison conditions. Buea-based Human Rights Watch reported a few prison visits in the Southwest Region. The International Federation of Actions by Christians Littoral also conducted prison visits mostly in Edea and Mbanga, in the Littoral Region. Other NGOs, including Nouveaux Droits de l'Homme, the Network for Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa (REDHAC), and the Justice and Peace Commissions of Catholic Archdiocese also conducted prison visits, but with reduced access.

Improvements: The new Douala-Ngoma Central Prison, reported completed in 2020, was still not functional as of December. The facility was expected to help address prison overcrowding and improve the living conditions of inmates at the Douala-New Bell Central Prison. As of the end of December, the new facility was reportedly still missing equipment and required additional construction before it could begin receiving inmates.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness in court of an arrest or detention. The law states that except in the case of an individual discovered in the act of committing a felony or misdemeanor, the officials making the arrest must disclose their identity and inform the detainee of the reason for his or her arrest. Any person illegally detained by police, the state counsel, or the examining magistrate may receive compensation. The government did not always respect these provisions.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires police to obtain a warrant from a judge or prosecutor before making an arrest, except when a person is caught in the act of committing a crime, but police often did not respect this requirement. The law provides that suspects be brought promptly before a judge or prosecutor, although this often did not occur, and citizens were detained without judicial authorization. Police may legally detain a person in connection with a common crime for up to 48 hours, renewable once. This period may, with the written approval of the state counsel, be exceptionally extended twice before charges are brought. Nevertheless, police and gendarmes reportedly often exceeded these detention periods. The law also permits detention without charge for renewable periods of 15 days by administrative authorities, such as governors and civilian government officials serving in territorial command. The law also provides that individuals arrested on suspicion of terrorism and certain other crimes may be detained for investigation for periods of 15 days, renewable without limitation with authorization of the prosecutor. The law allows access to legal counsel and family members, although police frequently denied detainees access to both. The law prohibits incommunicado

detention, but such cases occurred, especially in connection with the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. The law permits bail, allows citizens the right to appeal to recuse judges and provides the right to sue for unlawful arrest, but these rights were seldom respected. Bail was approved only on a selective basis, and applications to recuse judges with conflicts of interest rarely succeeded, especially in politically sensitive cases.

Arbitrary Arrest: Police, gendarmes, the BIR, and other government authorities reportedly continued to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily, often holding them for prolonged periods without charge or trial and at times incommunicado. “Friday arrests,” a practice whereby individuals arrested on a Friday typically remained in detention until at least Monday unless the detainee paid a bribe, continued, although on a limited scale.

On May 31, gendarmes arrested Nicodemus Nde Ntso Amungwa, a lawyer, while he was assisting a client during his interrogation at the gendarmerie facility in Yaounde. Minlo, a warrant officer, allegedly seized Amungwa’s cell phone without a warrant, claiming Amungwa had taken photographs of the facility. While searching for the alleged photographs, the gendarme found other photographs that recorded alleged military abuses in Cameroon’s Northwest and Southwest Regions and arrested Amungwa. Amungwa was taken to the SED, where he was detained for 10 days at the SCRJ. Amungwa was first presented to the government commissioner at the Yaounde Military Tribunal on June 3, but the government commissioner returned the case file to the investigating unit. Upon his release, authorities dropped the charges against Amungwa (see also section 6, Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, including case of “Shakiro” and “Patricia”).

Government authorities arrested four members of the NGO consortium Stand Up for Cameroon in September 2020 in Douala after a “Friday in Black” meeting held at the Cameroon People’s Party headquarters. After 15 months of pretrial detention, on December 31, the military tribunal in Douala sentenced them to 16 months in prison, including time served, after declaring them guilty of insurrection. The four, Moussa Bello, Etienne Ntsama, Mira Angoung, and Tehle Membou, were reportedly subjected to brutal treatment and interrogated without legal counsel. At least 124 of the more than 500 citizens arrested in September 2020 in connection with the planned MRC protest remained in detention as of December 31, according to their lawyers. A few of the 500 who were detained were released at police stations, while others were prosecuted in civilian jurisdictions and received varying sentences. On December 27 and 28, the military tribunal in Yaounde sentenced 48 of the remaining detainees to prison terms ranging from one to seven years. Accused among other things of rebellion, rioting, and insurrection, they were sentenced in the absence of their lawyers, who in September withdrew from all pending proceedings to denounce what they referred to as a “lack of independence” of the judges. In many of the cases, lawyers initiated habeas corpus proceedings or asked the judges to recuse themselves from the hearing due to conflicts of interest or perceived judicial bias.

Pretrial Detention: The code of criminal procedure provides for a maximum of 18 months’ detention before trial, but many detainees waited years to appear in court. The 2014 antiterrorism law provides that a suspect may be held indefinitely in investigative detention with the authorization of the prosecutor. According to estimates by the Human Rights Commission of the Cameroon Bar Association, there were 18,437 pretrial detainees in a total of 31,815 inmates as of September. Some of the detainees had been awaiting trial for more than five years. In some cases the length of pretrial detention equaled, and in other cases exceeded, the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. Factors contributing to lengthy pretrial detentions included, but were not limited to, insufficient staff, mismanagement of case files, inability to pay court fees, and the politicization of some legal proceedings that required direction from authorities in the central government. Lawyers reported a prolonged pretrial detention in what they referred to as the Calabar 37. The case involved 37 persons from the Northwest and Southwest Regions who were repatriated from Calabar, Nigeria, the same day as separatist leader Sisiku Ayuk Tabe in 2019. According to their defense lawyers, while the Military Tribunal in Yaounde prosecuted Sisiku and nine of his followers and sentenced them to life imprisonment in August 2019, the 37 other detainees who began appearing in court in October 2019 had their case adjourned without the court providing a cause.

Freelance journalist Kingsley Fumunyuy Njoka, whom plainclothes security agents arrested in Douala in May 2020, remained in pretrial detention. He was allegedly interrogated regarding his reporting in relation to the Anglophone crisis, and he was placed in a six-month pretrial detention at the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaounde. During the March parliamentary session, a parliamentarian questioned the Minister Delegate for Defense Assomo regarding the status of this case, to which Assomo replied that the trial would soon begin, without providing any further details. In June 2020 Njoka made his first appearance in court, but the case was adjourned. Reporters Without Borders denounced his arrest and provisional detention and said the charges against him were not yet substantiated. As of October, according to one of Njoka’s lawyers, the matter was still before the government commissioner at the Military Tribunal, and Njoka’s six-month preventive custody had been extended.

Amadou Vamoulke, a former general manager of state-owned Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) who was arrested and detained in 2016 on embezzlement charges, continued to await trial at the Kondengui Central Prison. After at least 50 hearings as of September 26, the Special Criminal Court had not reached a decision on his case as of the end of December.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, but this was not always the case. In some instances the outcomes of trials appeared influenced by the government, especially in politically sensitive cases. Despite the judiciary's partial independence from the executive and legislative branches, the president of the republic appoints all members of the bench and legal department of the judicial branch, including the president of the Supreme Court, as well as the president and members of the Constitutional Council, and he may dismiss them at will.

Military courts may exercise jurisdiction over civilians in a broad number of offenses including civil unrest. Military courts increasingly exercised jurisdiction over peaceful demonstrations, which the government had not previously authorized.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial without undue delay, and the defendant is presumed innocent. Authorities did not always respect the law, applying the presumption of innocence in a selective manner. Criminal defendants have the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges, with free assistance of an interpreter. Defendants have the right to be present and to consult with an attorney of their choice, but in many cases the government did not respect this right, restricting access to lawyers, particularly in cases of individuals suspected of complicity with separatists, or political opponents. When defendants cannot pay for their own legal defense, the court may appoint trial counsel at public expense, but the process was often burdensome and lengthy, and the quality of legal assistance was poor. Authorities generally allowed defendants to question witnesses and to present witnesses and evidence on their own behalf but did not compel witnesses to testify in the Ngarbuh trial. In some cases related to the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions, defendants reported that the state did not share evidence during discovery and that they were not provided the opportunity to cross-examine witnesses. Defendants have the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense and not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but authorities often violated this right. Hearsay and anonymous testimony were sometimes permitted, especially in terrorism cases. Examining magistrates sometimes attempted to induce political opponents and suspected separatists to incriminate themselves. Defendants may appeal convictions up to the Supreme Court and may subsequently petition the president for pardon.

Courts often limited procedural rights in politically sensitive cases. During a press briefing on September 9, the collective of the 60 lawyers defending MRC detainees announced its decision to withdraw from proceedings concerning the remaining 124 inmates, who were held in Bafoussam, Douala, Mfou, and Yaounde, and those whose appeals were awaiting review. Justifying their decision, the lawyers said they could not continue to provide professional services under conditions contrary to their oath as lawyers and did not want to be associated with arbitrariness and illegality. They said all civil, administrative, and military judges handling the cases lacked independence and fairness. According to the lawyers, the judges violated their oath as magistrates by systematically refusing to apply the law, which is contrary to judicial ethics and the principles of justice in conformity with human rights. Addressing journalists on the occasion, barrister Meli, the lead lawyer, remarked that all steps taken before judicial police officers as well as before civil and military courts for a statutory release, a release on bail or under guarantor, remained unaddressed for the most part or had simply been rejected. Meli said the same applied to all habeas corpus requests initiated from October 2020 to establish the illegal, unlawful, and arbitrary character of the arrests. Overall the lawyers said they carried out 279 procedures, all of which were unsuccessful.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of newly identified political detainees as of December. At least 124 of those associated with the September 2020 protests called for by the MRC opposition party, however, remained in detention. Prominent among the remaining detainees were MRC treasurer Alain Fogue and MRC leader Maurice Kamto's spokesperson Olivier Bibou Nissack. As in the previous year, political prisoners were detained under heightened security, often in SED facilities, at the Kondengui Principal Prison and the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaounde, the New Bell Central Prison in Douala, and the Mfou Principal Prison in the Center Region. Some were allegedly held at DGRE facilities. Political detainees often did not enjoy the same protections as other detainees, and the government at times restricted access to them by human rights organizations. There were credible allegations that the government falsely charged peaceful dissidents with violence.

REDHAC in an April 7 press release expressed concern regarding the judicial harassment against MRC detainees in Douala, including Ndljole Annis Wilfried, Kouamou Kouam Adolphe Romuuald, Tatcheumou Noutebel Constant Rofel, Kamou Staphane, Kue Francois, Kontchou Thomas, Feugou Ludovic, Tanakeng Lezigning Mecxhideng, Nsa Ngako Guesie Pene, Pouakou Jiabvo Andre Gislain, Kue Bogne Colline, Nguengang Simplicie Romeo, and Maptouhe Antoine Roger. According to the press release, the investigating judge No.3 at the Douala Military Court, Nyango Eko Linda Epse Afane Fongo, on April 1, referred the case to the military court ruling on criminal matters. The MRC members were indicted for offenses including "revolution, insurrection, public meeting demonstrations, and gatherings."

The 10 separatist leaders, including Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, whom the Yaounde Military Tribunal sentenced to life imprisonment in 2019, remained in prison, since the Court of Appeals in September confirmed the sentence. Former minister of state for territorial administration Marafa Hamidou Yaya, who was convicted in 2012 on corruption charges and sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment, remained in prison.

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country

Unlike in previous years, there were no credible reports during the year of politically motivated reprisal against individuals located outside the country.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens and organizations have the right to seek civil remedies for human rights abuses through administrative procedures or the legal system; both options involved lengthy delays. Individuals and organizations may appeal adverse decisions domestically or to regional human rights bodies, but the decisions of regional human rights bodies are not binding.

Property Seizure and Restitution

On January 9, administrative authorities forcibly evicted more than 100 families from New-Town Airport, a township located near the Douala International Airport. Houses were bulldozed and protesters were teargassed. Officially, the operation was to "ensure the rights of way" for Douala Airport. A group of young persons protested the demolition of their homes and a mosque. Some of the persons evicted claimed they had been living in the area for more than 30 years. Authorities claimed no responsibility for resettling persons, and many were left homeless. One member of parliament Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation President Cabral Libii denounced the evictions and insisted that the persons whose rights had been violated should be compensated.

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

Although the constitution and law prohibit arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence, these rights were subject to restriction in the interests of the state, and there were credible reports police and gendarmes abused their positions by harassing citizens and conducting searches without warrants. The law permits a police officer to enter a private home during daylight hours without a warrant only if pursuing a person suspected of or seen committing a crime. Police and gendarmes often did not comply with this provision and entered private homes without a warrant. An administrative authority, including a governor or senior divisional officer, may authorize police to conduct neighborhood sweeps without warrants, and this practice occurred.

The Buea-based NGO Human Is Right reported in August that it documented several cases of arbitrary arrests and detentions by defense and security forces in Mutengene, Muea, Mile 16, Mile 14, and Molyko, in the Southwest Region, from August 18 to August 30. According to Human Is Right, security forces patrolling neighborhoods arrested persons, especially young men, and searched their homes without warrants. An anonymous witness reportedly told Human Is Right how his 24-year-old son was arrested in Molyko, despite having his national identification card, and subsequently was asked to pay 50,000 CFA francs (\$91) to secure his release.

Reports suggest authorities punished family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives. In an audio recording circulated on social media platforms early on August 3, the separatist fighter alias "General No Pity," who controlled a separatist base known as Marine Forces located in Ndop, Northwest Region, claimed that soldiers stormed his compound and arrested his "uncles, aunts, younger brothers, and sisters." He gave authorities 48 hours to release the family members, threatening to wreak havoc if anything bad happened to them. The NGO The Center for Research and Resources Distribution to Rural and Underprivileged People (CEREDRUP) confirmed his claims in a September 4 report. According to CEREDRUP, No Pity's brother and cousin were released on August 5, but his mother and uncle remained in government custody. In order to pressure for their release, No Pity and his fighters took up positions along the Bamenda Kumbo Highway in Ndop and Sabga Hill, completely blocking the road for weeks. As of late December, there was no official statement from the government concerning the arrests.

g. Conflict-related Abuses

Killings: There were credible reports that members of government forces and separatist fighters deliberately killed civilians. On July 4, according to multiple credible sources, soldiers at a security checkpoint shot and killed local resident Djibring Dubila Ngoran. A July 6 government press release described the victim as a fugitive from justice and accused him of acting in complicity with separatists abroad. Local residents rejected this narrative, and hundreds of civilians protested on the streets of Bamenda.

On July 18, separatists beheaded Esomba Nlend at Ekondo Titi Beach, accusing him of being a traitor. On July 23, in Ekondo Titi, Ndian division of the Southwest Region, separatists killed former fighter John Eyallo, who had laid down his arms and joined the Deradicalization, Demobilization, and Rehabilitation center in Buea.

Abductions: Armed separatists allegedly kidnapped several persons for not respecting the separatist-imposed lockdown measures. The separatists held persons as hostages, including public officials, political leaders, teachers, schoolchildren, and traditional leaders. There were credible allegations that separatists physically brutalized their victims.

On January 13, armed separatists attacked a transport truck at Bamessing in the Ndop subdivision in the Northwest Region and abducted the driver and his assistant. Two days later, on January 15, two civilians were abducted by alleged separatists from their farm in Mbelewa, in the Bamenda III municipality. According to the NGO Reach Out, separatists abducted three civilians from a construction site on January 21 at Mile 6 Nkwen, in the Bamenda III municipality of the Northwest Region, for failing to receive a permit from the local commander of separatist forces before beginning construction.

On February 3, armed men believed to be separatists abducted three officers of the Bamenda II council, while council members were in the process of sealing shops. In a video found on social media, officers could be seen shirtless, sitting on the ground, and being threatened by their abductors, who accused them of violating the laws of “Ambazonia.”

On March 12, HRW reported that armed separatists kidnapped a medical doctor in the Northwest Region on February 27 and took him to their camp. The separatists accused the victim of “not contributing to the struggle” and threatened to kill him. The doctor was released six hours later, after a 300,000 CFA francs (\$545) ransom payment.

Several media outlets reported that on March 13, gunmen presumed to be separatists abducted Ayiseh Bonyui Fame, a journalist assigned to the CRTV station in Buea, the Southwest Region. A video that was widely circulated on social media featured Ayiseh pleading for her life while in captivity at knifepoint at an unknown location. Ayiseh was eventually released on the night of March 14 after her family paid part of the ransom amount requested.

Reach Out reported in May that on January 12, security forces raided Bawum in the Northwest Region and burned down the Bafut ecovillage, which was also a UNESCO world cultural heritage site. On January 22, security forces attacked the village of Bafia in Muyuka subdivision of the Southwest Region and set houses on fire. A similar incident happened on February 16 in Tad, a village in Batibo subdivision of the Northwest Region. On March 1, security forces also set fire to a guest house and laboratory of the Baptist hospital in Bamkikai, Kumbo subdivision, according to multiple sources. In its August report, HRW indicated that security forces destroyed and looted at least 33 homes, shops, as well as a traditional leader’s palace in the Northwest Region on June 8 and 9. On June 25, according to credible sources, including OCHA, separatists in the Northwest Region kidnapped four humanitarian workers and held them overnight.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to anecdotal reports, members of government forces physically abused civilians and prisoners in their custody. Reports suggested that both government forces and separatists mistreated persons, including through sexual and gender-based violence (see also section 1.a.).

Child Soldiers: The government did not recruit or use child soldiers. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reported allegations that some members of defense and security forces used children for intelligence gathering. Some community neighborhood watch groups, known as vigilance committees, may have used and recruited children as young as 12 in operations against Boko Haram and ISIS-WA. Authorities increasingly encouraged the creation of vigilance committees. On July 29, for example, the senior divisional officer for Bamboutos, Francois Franklin Etapa, issued a decision to reorganize local self-defense committees in his command zone.

Boko Haram continued to recruit and use child soldiers, including girls, in its attacks on civilian and military targets.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: As in the previous year, there were reports of violence directed against health workers and institutions and the use of firearms around health facilities by members of security forces and armed separatists.

From January to June, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 29 attacks were reported in seven health districts in the Northwest Region and seven health districts in the Southwest Region. Health districts also reported attacks on health-care facilities. The types of attacks included removal of patients and health workers; criminalization of health care; psychological violence, abduction, arrest, and detention of health personnel or patients; and setting of fires. These attacks resulted in the death of one patient and the complete destruction of one district health service structure and equipment.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government often restricted this right, explicitly or implicitly. Government failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters led to de facto restrictions on the freedom of expression.

Freedom of Expression: Government officials penalized individuals or organizations that criticized or expressed views at odds with government policy. Individuals who criticized the government publicly or privately frequently faced reprisals. On several occasions the government invoked laws requiring permits or government notification of public protests to stifle discourse.

On January 20, during a meeting held at the governor's office with traditional rulers of the West Region in Bafoussam, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji criticized the traditional rulers because of a statement some of them issued in November 2020 concerning the sociopolitical situation in the country. In the statement the traditional rulers remarked that the military option to curb the Anglophone crisis had shown its limitations and suggested that a different avenue for peace was needed. Relaying the minister's message, state-funded CRTV declared that "traditional rulers must not engage or allow their people to engage in the political struggle but should rather stimulate development through the decentralization process."

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Media, including Online Media: Private media were active and expressed a wide spectrum of viewpoints. The media landscape faced constraints on editorial independence, in part due to fear of reprisal from state and nonstate armed actors, including separatists connected to the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. Journalists reported practicing self-censorship to avoid repercussions, including extortion for criticizing or contradicting the government.

Violence and Harassment: Police, gendarmes, and other government agents arrested, detained, physically attacked, and intimidated journalists. The state's failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on journalists created de facto restrictions.

The private daily newspaper *Le Jour* reported that on April 29, Yaounde V municipal police members assaulted two reporters of Canal 2 International while they were covering a protest by commercial bike riders. According to media reports, the Yaounde V police severely beat Canal 2 cameraman Bertrand Tchasse, seized and destroyed his working equipment, and threatened to kill him. Other team members, including a driver and a reporter, were threatened. A government spokesperson said Tchasse's work equipment was seized because the journalists were encouraging motorbike riders to be disorderly in order to record additional footage for their report.

On April 14, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that six armed men in plainclothes arrested Mbombog Mbog Matip, director of the privately owned *Climat Social* newspaper, who also posts political commentary on social media, in August 2020. CPJ's release indicated that Mbombog Mbog was held at the SED until September 2020, when a military court judge charged him with "propagation of false news," and placed him on pretrial detention until March 7. Following the court hearing, the journalist was transferred to Kondengui Central Prison in Yaounde. CPJ stated that Mbombog Mbog remained in custody until March 7 without receiving any update regarding his case. CPJ reported that in the months before he was arrested, Mbombog Mbog was investigating an alleged coup attempt involving Colonel Joel Emile Bamkoui, the commander of the Department of Military Security. While Mbombog Mbog was detained at SED, Bamkoui reportedly beat and threatened him, according to *CamerounWeb*. CPJ further reported that the country had eight journalists in prison as of April, many of whom were arrested for being perceived as antigovernment.

On April 19, progovernment private television channel Vision 4 produced a report on J. Remy Ngonu, a Cameroonian journalist who lived in France and participated in the *Radio Foot International* program on Radio France International. In the report Raoul Christophe Bia questioned Remy Ngonu's

sexual orientation. Using photoshopped pictures as evidence, Christophe Bia explicitly compared Ngonu to an animal. On September 16, Vision 4 television channel again featured the derogatory imagery in another report. Some observers believed the questioning of Ngonu's sexual orientation and the photoshopped images were in response to Ngonu's criticism of the government.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: By law the Ministry of Communication requires editors to submit two signed copies of their newspapers within two hours after publication. Journalists and media outlets reported practicing self-censorship, especially if the National Communication Council had suspended them previously.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel, slander, defamation, and blasphemy are treated as criminal offenses. The law authorizes the government to initiate a criminal suit when the president or other senior government officials are the alleged victims. These laws place the burden of proof on the defendant, and crimes are punishable by prison terms and substantial fines. While the government may initiate criminal suits when the president or other senior government official are alleged victims, ordinary citizens may also file libel or slander suits, but the law is often applied selectively and privileges senior government officials and well connected individuals.

On June 17, the Court of First Instance in Mbanga, Littoral Region, sentenced Clement Ytembe Bonda, Andre Boris Wameni, and Flavy Kamou Wouwe to one year of imprisonment and a fine after declaring them guilty of joint contempt of the president of the republic, contempt of the civil authorities, and propagating fake news on social media. The three individuals were workers at the Plantations de Haut Penja (PHP) agricultural complex. They were arrested on June 11 after a video that was widely circulated on social network showed them lambasting the poor working conditions at PHP. In the video Bonda, the main speaker, used critical language to describe President Paul Biya and his government. He could be heard saying that they worked at the banana plantation from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., under the rain and sun for a monthly salary of approximately 30,000 CFA francs (\$55) while government ministers in Yaounde loitered and stole hundreds of billions from public coffers.

After more than two years in pretrial detention as the result of a defamation complaint filed by French Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala, Paul Chouta, who worked as a reporter for the privately owned *Cameroon Web news* website, was released on May 20, two days after his sentencing by the Mfoundi Court of First Instance to 23 months' imprisonment. The court issued a post facto sentence to cover the time he was imprisoned without charge.

At a meeting in Yaounde on July 5 for its 28th Extraordinary Session, the National Communication Council sanctioned three journalists for what they deemed to be unprofessional conduct. The sanctions ranged from suspensions for one to six months and a warning. Stive Jocelyn Ngo, a DBS TV journalist, received a 30-day suspension for publishing unsubstantiated and "offensive" information concerning the president of France on April 21 during the program *DBS Martin*. Sismondi Barkev Bidjocka, publisher of Ris Radio, received a one-month suspension for "insufficient investigation" leading to the broadcast of unsubstantiated and "offensive" information against parliamentarian Cabral Libii. The publisher insinuated that Cabral was engaged in some malfeasance involving the procurement of public contracts for private gain related to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Nynanssi Nkouya, publisher of *Confidence Magazine*, received a six-month suspension for publishing a flyer containing "offensive" information concerning Senator Sylvester Nghouchinghe.

National Security: Authorities often cited laws against terrorism or protecting national security to threaten critics of the government.

Nongovernmental Impact: There were no reported cases of armed separatist groups in the Southwest and Northwest Regions explicitly inhibiting freedom of expression, including for the press. Restrictions on movements by armed separatists, however, contributed to limiting freedom of the press. Also, some political and opinion leaders sought to inhibit freedom of expression by criticizing those who expressed views that were at odds with government policies.

Internet Freedom

Anecdotal reports indicated that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

Although there were no legal restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events, some school authorities reportedly sanctioned academic personnel for teaching politically sensitive topics, and administrative officials often deterred teachers from criticizing the government.

Anecdotal reporting suggested scientists and academics were subjected to threats, intimidation, and restriction on freedom of expression. In its March report on human rights, the NGO consortium Stand Up for Cameroon reported professor Pascal Charlemagne Messanga Nyamding, a former lecturer at the Institute of International Relations of Cameroon, feared for his life after a March 9 interrogation at SED.

Governor of the East Region Gregoire Mvondo ordered the inclusion of exam questions on the content of President Biya's February 10 message to the youth.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government limited and restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. Government failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters led to de facto restrictions on the freedom of assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Although the law provides for freedom of peaceful assembly, the government often restricted this right. The law requires organizers of public meetings, demonstrations, and processions to notify officials in advance but does not require prior government approval for public assemblies, nor does it authorize the government to suppress public assemblies that it did not approve in advance. Nevertheless, officials routinely asserted the law implicitly authorizes the government to grant or deny permission for public assemblies. The government often granted permits for gatherings on a selective basis and used force to suppress assemblies for which it had not issued permits. On December 1, Maurice Kamto intended to organize a book launch at Restaurant La Chaumiere in the Bonapriso neighborhood of Douala, but authorities deployed security forces to prevent the event. Early in the morning, security forces took positions on strategic areas, disrupted traffic, and blocked access to the proposed venue of the book launch. Also, police blocked access to hotel Vallee des Princes where Kamto had secured accommodation. After a day of tension, police escorted Kamto out of Douala.

Authorities typically cited security and health-related concerns as the basis for deciding to block assemblies. Progovernment groups, however, were generally authorized to organize public demonstrations.

On July 16, Roger Justin Noah, deputy secretary general of the opposition MRC, petitioned the divisional officer of Yaounde I for a public protest. The purpose of the event, according to the MRC, was to promote peace in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, call for solidarity with the populations of the Far North Region victimized by Boko Haram, denounce ethnocentrism and hate speech, and call on the government to respect the political rights of all citizens, including political prisoners. The event was scheduled to take place on July 25; however, on July 22, the divisional officer banned the demonstration, citing the risk of "disturbing public order" and "spreading COVID-19." The government, however, approved demonstrations in support of President Biya in Mokolo, Far North Region, on July 21, and on July 25 in Bertoua, East Region. Overall, these rallies, which took place respectively a day before and three days after the ban on the MRC planned demonstration, were perceived by observers as part of reactions against protest messages by activists in the diaspora referred to as "Brigade antisardinards," who disrupted President Biya's stay at the Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva, Switzerland, on July 17 through the duration of his stay.

On December 15, the divisional officer of Yaounde 2 also banned a subregional consultation that the Network of Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa previously planned to hold on December 16 at the Yaounde Conference Center. The stated purpose of the event was to seek solutions to the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. The divisional officer cited security and COVID-19-pandemic-related concerns as reasons to justify his decision.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and law provide for the freedom of association, but the law also limits this right. On the recommendation of the senior divisional officer, the Ministry of Territorial Administration may suspend the activities of an association for three months on grounds that the association is disrupting public order. The minister may also dissolve an association if it is deemed a threat to state security. National associations may acquire legal status by declaring themselves in writing to the ministry, but the ministry must explicitly register foreign associations, and the president must accredit religious groups upon the recommendation of the minister of territorial administration. The law imposes substantial fines for individuals who form and operate any such association without ministry approval. The law prohibits organizations that advocate a goal contrary to the constitution, laws, and morality, as well as those that aim to challenge the security, territorial integrity, national unity, national integration, or republican form of the state.

Conditions for recognition of political parties, NGOs, and associations were complicated, involved long delays, and were unevenly enforced (see also section 3, Political Parties and Political Participation). This resulted in associations operating in legal uncertainty with their activities tolerated but not formally approved.

Although the government did not officially ban any organizations, it continued to restrict the activities of some NGOs and political parties, including Doctors without Borders, Un Monde Avenir, and the MRC. In an August 2 press release, Doctors Without Borders indicated that it was forced to

withdraw teams from the Northwest Region, after nearly eight months of suspension by authorities. Authorities accused the humanitarian group of providing material assistance to separatists, a charge Doctors Without Borders consistently denied. In an August 26 release, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji ordered promoters of foreign organizations operating in Cameroon to update their status by submitting specific documentation within a month. Although the NGO Un Monde Avenir, which regularly denounces government abuses submitted the required file, the organization's leadership claimed their accreditation had not been renewed at year's end. Philip Nanga, the coordinator, reportedly learned from his banker that he could not open an account for the organization because its accreditation had been suspended.

c. Freedom of Religion

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

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, at times the government restricted these rights.

In-country Movement: Using minor infractions as a pretext, police, gendarmes, and custom officers often extorted bribes and harassed travelers at roadblocks and checkpoints in cities and on most highways. Police frequently stopped travelers to check identification documents, including national identity cards, passports, residence permits, vehicle registrations, and tax receipts as security and immigration control measures. As in the previous year, humanitarian organizations cited difficulty in accessing certain areas and in some instances were harassed and denied passage by government authorities. Unaccompanied women were frequently harassed when traveling alone. Authorities restricted movements of persons and goods, including motorbikes, especially in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, citing security concerns. Armed separatists also restricted the movements of persons and goods in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, sometimes in a deliberate attempt to harass and intimidate the local population. They often used weekly lockdowns referred to as "ghost towns" to enforce restrictions on movement, in which the armed separatists demanded all businesses close and residents stay home. Violent crime, including kidnapping by terrorists, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, assault, and carjacking, were major impediments to in-country movement in the three northern regions and part of the East Region.

On July 20, Simon Emile Mooh, the senior divisional officer for Mezam in the Northwest Region, banned the operation of motorbikes in Bali subdivision. The officer indicated that the ban would last for three months and could be extended. The decision followed the killing of five police officers by suspected separatists riding motorbikes in Bali on July 18. On September 11, separatists aligned with a faction of the *Interim Government of Ambazonia*, signed a resolution instituting a lockdown of the Northwest and Southwest Regions beginning on September 15 and ending on October 1. During the lockdown period, all vehicles were banned from the roads in these regions. Separatists warned that any person or group of persons contravening the ban would be punished. According to media reports, streets and markets in Buea, Kumba, and Bamenda remained empty, and schools closed on September 16 following the declaration.

Foreign Travel: Citizens have the right to leave the country without arbitrary restrictions. The movement of some political opponents and debtors, however, was monitored, and their travel documents were often confiscated to confine them to the country. To obtain exit permits, citizens need a valid passport and visa for their country of destination.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

According to estimates by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were more than two million persons of concern as of December 31, and there were more than one million internally displaced persons (IDPs), of whom 358,000 were in the Far North Region and 711,000 in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. In addition the country had an estimated 477,500 formerly displaced persons who had returned to their place of origin. Humanitarian access remained very limited, since military officials maintained tight control over access. Insecurity due to armed groups in the Northwest and Southwest Regions also limited humanitarian access in some areas. UN Humanitarian Air Service flights to the Northwest Region were suspended due to security concerns. Additional factors driving displacements included the desire to flee from Boko Haram.

The government put in place Deradicalization, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) centers to promote the safe, voluntary return, resettlement, or local integration of former combatants in the Far North, Northwest, and Southwest Regions. Reports suggested the government's DDR centers were inadequately resourced, and some of the former combatants left. During the year, however, many former Boko Haram fighters reportedly joined the DDR centers in the Far North Region after their leader Abubakar Shekau died. As of the end of August, more than 1,102 former fighters had joined the DDR centers since January, according to official estimates. Provision of basic social services to IDPs and assistance to returnees were carried out by relief actors with minimal support

from the government. Humanitarian actors mentioned on several occasions that the humanitarian community could not effectively implement its DDR programming without having a legal framework in place, which the government had thus far not implemented. In the Northwest and Southwest Regions, humanitarian actors mostly had access to urban centers. The government made some efforts to provide urgently needed in-kind assistance to crisis-affected IDPs in the Northwest and Southwest Regions based on its humanitarian assistance response plan. This assistance was reportedly distributed to populations without an assessment of their needs and only to persons in accessible urban areas.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government generally cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. The country operated an open-door policy. This policy, however, was not translated into a progressive legal framework allowing refugees their rights as stated in various legal instruments.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system of providing protection to refugees, but the implementation of this system was weak. UNHCR continued to provide documentation and assistance to the refugee population, although local authorities did not always recognize the documents as official, which prevented refugees from travelling and engaging in business activities. UNHCR and the government continued to conduct biometric verification and registration of refugees in the Far North Region, including those not living in refugee camps.

Freedom of Movement: The government did not provide documents in a timely manner to refugees and other persons in need of primary documentation, which restricted movement.

Access to Basic Services: Refugees had limited access to health care, education, and employment opportunities. Their rural host communities faced similar problems, but the situation was somewhat worse for refugees. Access to these services varied according to the location of the refugees, with those in camps receiving more support through humanitarian assistance, while refugees living in host communities faced more difficulty receiving services. On May 25, the Ministry of Public Health and UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding providing for the treatment of refugees in public health facilities. A strategic integration plan covers refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) and Nigeria, and those displaced because of the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of the country. The agreement was intended to afford refugee and host population equitable access to quality primary health-care services and a referral system for secondary and tertiary care.

Durable Solutions: There was no evidence that the government accepted refugees for resettlement or offered naturalization to refugees residing on its territory. The government, however, assisted in the voluntary return of persons from CAR and Nigeria.

On February 10, the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon and UNHCR announced the planned voluntary return of 5,000 Nigerian refugees from the Minawao refugee camp in the Far North Region. On March 8, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji donated relief packages from President Biya to the first contingent of more than 400 Nigerian refugees who voluntarily opted to return home. After 3,880 Nigerian refugees were voluntarily returned to Banki and Bama towns in Nigeria's Borno State, returns were halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, insecurity, and movement difficulties due to the rainy season. The private daily *Le Jour* indicated that the returns took place between January and March, within the framework of the regional strategy for stabilization, recovery, and resilience of the Lake Chad basin areas affected by the Boko Haram crisis. In October UNHCR reported that after meetings with Nigerian and Cameroonian officials, 7,000 Nigerians were scheduled to return home in 14 convoys of 500 persons during the rest of the year and in 2022.

Temporary Protection: The government continued to provide temporary and unofficial protection to individuals who might not qualify as refugees, extending this protection to hundreds of individuals, including third-country nationals who had fled violence in CAR. Due to their unofficial status and inability to access services or support, many of these individuals were subject to harassment and other abuses.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage. Elections, however, were often marked by irregularities, although no elections were conducted during the year.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In February 2020 the country held simultaneous legislative and municipal elections. An estimated 32 political parties participated in the legislative elections and 43 participated in the municipal elections. Security concerns constrained voter participation in the Northwest and

Southwest Regions. The courts annulled the legislative elections in 11 constituencies of the Northwest and Southwest Regions due to voter turnout of less than 10 percent. Legislative reruns occurred in the 11 constituencies in March 2020. The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) won 152 of the 180 National Assembly seats and 316 of 360 local councils. Opposing political parties lost significant numbers of seats when compared with previous elections. Overall, eight opposition political parties won seats in the National Assembly, and nine won control of local councils. Additionally, irregularities including lack of equal access to media and campaign space, restrictions on the ability of opposition candidates to register for the election, ballot stuffing, lack of ballot secrecy, voter intimidation, inconsistent use of identification cards, and lack of expertise among local polling officials prompted the Constitutional Council and regional administrative courts to annul some legislative elections.

Estimates of voter turnout showed an unprecedented low rate of participation of 43 percent for the legislative and municipal elections in 2020. The lower turnout could partially be attributed to the call for a boycott of the elections by the MRC and other opposition parties. In December 2020 the first-ever election of regional councilors was held, 24 years after provisions for regional elections in the 1996 constitution. Due to the gains achieved in the municipal councils that made up the electoral college in the February 2020 elections, the ruling CPDM won in nine of the 10 regions. The government cited the regional elections as a sign of progress on decentralization, although political opposition and civil society groups criticized the elections for failing to meaningfully decentralize power.

In 2018 Paul Biya was re-elected president in an election marred by irregularities and against the backdrop of protracted sociopolitical unrest in the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

Political Parties and Political Participation: As of the end of December, the country had approximately 330 registered political parties. During the year the government accredited 11 new political parties "to enrich the political debate and encourage the expression of freedoms." The CPDM remained dominant at every level of government due to restrictions on opposition political parties, gerrymandering, unbalanced media coverage, the use of state funds to promote party campaigns, interference with the right of opposition parties to register as candidates and to organize during electoral campaigns, and undue influence of traditional rulers, who were largely coopted by the CPDM. Traditional rulers, who received salaries from the government, openly declared their support for President Biya prior to the 2018 presidential election, and some reportedly compelled residents of their constituencies to prove they did not vote for an opposition candidate by presenting unused ballots. Traditional rulers who refused to associate with the government were either removed or threatened with destitution. Membership in the ruling political party conferred significant advantages, including in the allocation of key jobs in state-owned entities and the civil service. Conversely, membership in some opposition political parties, especially the MRC, was often associated with threats and intimidation from the government.

Human rights organizations and opposition political actors considered the drawing of voter districts and distribution of parliamentary or municipal councilors' seats unfair. They complained that smaller districts considered CPDM strongholds were allocated a disproportionate number of seats compared with more populous districts where the opposition was expected to poll strongly. Managers of state-owned companies and other high-level government officials used corporate resources to campaign for candidates sponsored by the ruling party.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities, or persons with disabilities in the political process and they did participate, although women remained underrepresented at all levels of government. There were no official laws limiting the participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons; however, observers noted social stigma and criminalization of same-sex conduct may have deterred LGBTQI+ persons from openly participating in the political process. In parliament women occupied 87 of 280 seats, 61 in the National Assembly and 26 in the Senate. Women held 11 of 66 cabinet positions. Similar disparities existed in other senior-level offices, including territorial command and security and defense positions. The minority Baka, a nomadic indigenous group, were not represented in the Senate, National Assembly, or higher offices of government, although there were no laws limiting their participation.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption. Officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. The law identifies different offenses as corruption, including influence peddling, involvement in a prohibited employment, and failure to declare a known conflict of interest. Reporting corruption was encouraged through exempting whistleblowers from criminal proceedings. In addition to the laws, the National Anticorruption Agency (CONAC), Special Criminal Court, National Financial Investigation Agency, Ministry in Charge of Supreme State Audit, and Audit Bench of the Supreme Court also contributed to fighting

corruption in the country. CONAC, the most prominent of the anticorruption agencies, was constrained by the absence of any legislative or presidential mandate that could empower it to combat corruption. There were reports that senior officials sentenced to prison were not always required to forfeit their ill-gotten gains.

Corruption: As in 2020, allegations of mismanagement of resources continued, especially in respect to the special COVID-19-pandemic fund, which some referred to as “Covidgate.” The presidency in March ordered an audit of the management of COVID-19-pandemic spending to include an audit of the Special National Solidarity Fund established in 2020 to fight against the pandemic and its socioeconomic consequences. Endowed with a budget of 180 billion CFA francs (\$3.27 million), the Special Solidarity Fund was expected to be used, among other things, for the purchase of protective equipment, tests, ambulances, and medicines, and to manage the quarantine of travelers.

According to its interim report, the Audit Bench of the Supreme Court specifically targeted two ministries that played a central role in the official COVID-19-pandemic response, namely the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation. The report highlighted shortcomings including the degree of opacity in the awarding of contracts, overruns of allocated budgets, embezzlement, and blatant overbilling. According to the Audit Bench, Mediline Medical Cameroon (MMC) and Moda Holding Hong Kong (a shareholder of MMC) won 90 percent of the COVID-19 rapid tests purchased and received 95 percent of the available credit to finance purchase orders to the detriment of two other local providers with experience in the same field. Moda Holding Hong Kong billed the Ministry of Health for transportation-related expenses, but the incurred expenses were not proportional to the quantity of tests delivered. Auditors noted that a COVID-19 test purchased from MMC cost 17,500 CFA francs (\$32) per unit, 10,415 CFA francs (\$19) more than the price proposed by SD Biosensor. The overpayment cost the state an additional 14.5 billion CFA francs (\$26.36 million).

A dozen officials reportedly appeared before the commission during the investigation. Members of the political opposition and human rights activists urged the government to publish the full report, especially since all relevant agencies were not assessed in the interim report. On April 6, the presidency sent the Ministry of Justice a copy of the report on COVID-19-pandemic spending and instructed the minister to open a “judicial inquiry” into the misappropriation of funds. On May 28, Minister of Communication Rene Emmanuel Sadi reported that President Biya called for judicial proceedings to take place at the Special Criminal Court. In December the full report was released; however, no criminal proceedings had taken place by year’s end.

The trial of the former defense minister Edgar Alain Mebe Ngo opened at the Special Criminal Court in September 2020 after multiple adjournments. He stood accused of embezzling 236 billion CFA francs (\$429 million) as part of the purchase of military equipment for the army. Mebe Ngo and his wife had been awaiting trial at the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaounde since their arrest in 2019. As of the end of December, the court had not reached a decision.

The government continued Operation Sparrow Hawk that was launched in 2006 to fight embezzlement of public funds. As in the previous year, the Special Criminal Court opened new corruption cases during the year. The National Gendarmerie maintained a toll-free telephone line to allow citizens to report acts of corruption in the gendarmerie.

In a September 23 anticorruption report, CONAC reported the country lost close to 18 billion CFA francs (\$32.7 million) to corruption in 2020. The report on the state of the fight against corruption in 2020 showed that corruption remained prevalent in the country. The report identified the transportation sector, land tenure, and the police force as the three most corrupt sectors in the country, adding corrupt practices were rampant in the Center and Littoral Regions.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups investigated and published findings on human rights cases. Government officials rarely were cooperative and responsive to their views. Government officials impeded many local human rights NGOs by harassing their members, limiting access to prisoners, refusing to share information, and threatening violence against NGO personnel. The government took no action to investigate or prevent such occurrences. The government criticized reports from international human rights organizations by accusing them of publishing baseless accusations.

On August 2, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report entitled *Cameroon: New Abuses by Both Sides*, which accused government forces of destruction of property, rape, killings, execution of civilians, and looting in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. In response military spokesman Cyrille Atonfack Guemo firmly rejected what he referred to as an “outrageous and provocative” report. In an August 5 statement, he declared, “Everything appeared to clearly indicate that the multiple positions taken by HRW are intended only to discredit the defense and security forces.”

In an August 26 press release, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji announced an inquiry into the registration of all foreign NGOs operating in Cameroon. In the release Atanga Nji ordered them to deposit all required original documentation at his ministry by the end of September.

The order specifically asked for a dossier comprising an original copy of the document authorizing the organization in Cameroon; two copies of the organization's constitution; the instrument appointing the organization's representative; a legalized photocopy of the national identity card or the representative's passport that is less than three months old; a map indicating the location of the organization's headquarters, or of its legal representative's office and permanent telephone address; a complete list of nonnational staff working for the organization; their curricula vitae and certified copies of their passports; a complete list of local personnel including their work contracts; and the organization's annual activity program. Minister Atanga Nji added that foreign organizations that did not submit the documents prior to the required deadline would be suspended (see also section 2.b, Freedom of association). As of October the Ministry of Territorial Administration had relaxed some of the requirements after strong pushback from civil society organizations and international NGOs.

Observers saw the minister's decision as a strategy to intimidate human rights organizations and possibly ban those that highlighted government abuses. As in the previous year, human rights defenders and activists received anonymous threats from persons suspected to be affiliated with the government by telephone, text message, and email. In particular this was the case for the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network was a consistent target of the government.

On July 21, Chief Warrant Officer Bako Jean Oscar, commander of research Brigade I in Bonanjo, Douala, summoned Maximilienne Chantal Ngo Mbe, executive director of Network for Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa, to appear before him on August 9. The summons did not contain further information on the case in question, and authorities refused to specify what charges, if any, they were investigating. Ngo Mbe received an additional summons on August 13 from the Legion Gendarmerie to appear on August 16 again without any specified reason; however, the date in question fell on a holiday so she was not required to appear. Ngo Mbe received a subsequent summons to appear before the Yaounde Scientific and Judicial police in November, ordering her to appear on December 28; however, her lawyers petitioned to have the date postponed until February 2022.

Government Human Rights Bodies: In 2019 the government passed a law establishing the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC), as a replacement for the existing National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (NCHRF). During the year the president appointed 15 members to the CHRC, including James Mouangue Kobila, formerly acting chairperson of the NCHRF, as chairperson, and Galega Gana Raphael as the deputy chairperson. The CHRC became operational on April 29 after the team took the oath of office. Like the NCHRF, the CHRC is a nominally independent, government-funded institution. The law establishing the CHRC extended its mandate to protect human rights. While the CHRC coordinated actions with NGOs and participated in some inquiry commissions, it remained poorly funded.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape and provides penalties of between five and 10 years of imprisonment for convicted rapists. Police and courts rarely investigated or prosecuted rape cases, especially since survivors often did not report them. The law does not address spousal rape, nor does it specifically prohibit domestic violence, although assault is prohibited and punishable by imprisonment and fines.

During the year there were allegations that persons associated with the government raped women and children. Authorities investigated the allegations in some cases but denied the reports in other cases. On August 2, HRW reported that on June 8-9, members of the security forces raped a 53-year-old woman in the Northwest Region. Authorities did not order any investigation into the allegations (see also sections 1.a, 1.c., and 1.g.).

On April 29, Yaya Hamza Bamanga, an examining magistrate at the Koung-Khi High Court in Bandjoun, charged senior police inspector Asso'o Simon Jean with aggravated rape of a student (see also section 1.c.).

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law protects the bodily integrity of persons and prohibits genital mutilation for all women, including women ages 18 and older and girls younger than 18. Perpetrators are subject to a prison sentence of 10 to 20 years or imprisonment for life if the offender habitually carries out this practice for commercial purposes, or if the practice causes death. According to estimates by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), FGM/C prevalence among girls ages 15 to 19 between 2004 and 2018 was zero percent. On February 6, the International Day of Zero

Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation, Minister of Women's Empowerment and the Family Marie Therese Obama met the Muslim community at the Yaounde Briquetterie neighborhood to raise awareness concerning FGM/C. Although the practice was gradually dying out as indicated by statistical data collected during the previous 10 years, the minister said she believed it continued in some areas. As in the previous year, anecdotal reports suggested children were subjected to FGM/C in isolated areas of the Far North, East, and Southwest Regions and among the Choa and Ejagham ethnic groups.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Widows were sometimes forcibly married to one of their deceased husband's relatives to secure continued use of property left by the deceased husband, including the marital home. The government included provisions in the law outlawing the eviction of a spouse from the marital home by any person other than the other spouse. The practice of widow rites, by which widows were subject to certain trials such as bathing in public or movement restrictions, was also prevalent in some parts of the country, including in some rural communities of the West Region.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment. Offenders may be subject to imprisonment for periods of six months to one year and a fine. If the survivor is a minor, the penalty may be one to three years in prison. If the offender is the survivor's teacher, the penalty may increase to three to five years in prison. Despite these legal provisions, sexual harassment was widespread and there were no reports during the year that anyone was fined or imprisoned for sexual harassment, in part due to sexual harassment survivors' reluctance to file official complaints for fear of reprisal and or stigmatization.

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

The Ministry of Public Health offered counseling services to women during prenatal visits, promoting the concept of responsible parenthood and encouraging couples to use contraception to space the timing of their children. Many women, however, lacked the means to manage their reproductive health, and societal pressures continued to reinforce taboos on discussing reproductive health within certain communities. Women's dependence on receiving their husbands' consent continued to be a barrier in contraceptive decisions.

The government provided support to survivors of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence through the development of policies to protect survivors of gender-based violence, legal support to survivors via the judiciary network, general clinical care offered in health facilities, and collection of data through the District Health Information System and provision of situational analysis. Many of the prevention and basic support programs for survivors of gender-based violence were implemented by community-based organizations.

The Ministry of Health did not provide emergency contraception for survivors of gender-based violence. UNFPA provided a kit with emergency contraception as part of post-gender-based violence clinical care. These kits were offered in a few clinical sites that provided services to gender-based violence survivors.

UNFPA indicated that as of mid-September the contraceptive prevalence rate among all women ages 15 to 49 using any method was 27 percent, and 23 percent among married or in-union women ages 15 to 49. The information also indicated that contraceptive prevalence rate among all women ages 15 to 49 using a modern method was 22 percent and 17 percent among married or in-union women. Unmet need for family planning among all women ages 15 to 49 was 16 percent, while it was 23 percent of married or in-union women. Access to and availability of basic social services, including sexual and reproductive health care, however, were severely limited in conflict-affected regions, and many pregnant women did not have access to adequate maternal health care.

The 36 billion CFA francs (\$65.5 million) Health Check project launched in 2015 in the Adamawa, North and Far North Regions to contribute to the reduction of maternal and child mortality came under review on March 4. Maternal and neonatal mortality decreased to 467 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, and 28 neonatal deaths per 100,000 infants. Health checks were sold to women at a cost of 6,000 CFA francs (\$11), which granted women access to four prenatal consultations, echography, delivery including cesarian and postnatal consultations, and a 42-day stay after delivery in a health-care facility.

Discrimination: The constitution provides women and men the same legal status and rights. The government, however, often did not enforce the law. In practice, women did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. Although local government officials claimed women had access to land in their constituencies, the overall sociocultural practice of denying women the right to own land, especially through inheritance, was prevalent in most regions. The government did not implement any official discriminatory policy against women in such areas as divorce, child custody, employment,

credit, pay, owning or managing business or property, education, the judicial process, or housing. There were legal restrictions to women's employment in some occupations and industries. Within the private sector, fewer women occupied positions of responsibility.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The constitution states in its preamble that the State shall protect "minorities and preserve the rights of indigenous populations in accordance with the law," but it does not mention specific categories that qualify as minorities or indigenous populations. The laws and regulations on decentralization and elections also protect the rights of minorities by requiring that lists of candidates reflect the sociological landscape of constituencies, or that the office of president of a regional council or city mayor be held by a native of the constituency. The government made efforts to enforce these provisions, but some forms of discrimination and violence persisted.

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

On September 8, in Tonga, Nde division of the West Region, four persons were killed and several others injured in clashes between IDPs from the Northwest and Southwest Regions and local Bamileke communities. The conflict reportedly started when an Anglophone IDP killed a young Bamileke who was accused of theft. The local gendarmerie legionnaire station was reportedly burned down during the clashes between the communities.

On December 5, clashes between the Mousgoum and Arab Choa ethnic groups regarding control of water resources broke out in the Logone and Chari division of the Far North Region, leaving 22 persons dead, approximately 30 injured, and tens of thousands displaced in Chad, according to UNHCR. Thousands of persons fled to neighboring Chad for safety. Approximately 30 other persons died in similar clashes earlier in August.

Indigenous Peoples

Taking as basis the criteria for identifying indigenous populations contained in the International Labor Organization Convention 169 and the *Report of the African Commission's Working Group on Indigenous Populations/Communities*, the groups that may be considered indigenous in Cameroon are the Mbororo and the Baka. An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 Baka, including Bakola and Bagyeli, resided primarily in (and were the earliest known inhabitants of) the forested areas of the South and East Regions. The government did not effectively protect the civil or political rights of either group. Logging companies continued to destroy indigenous persons' naturally forested land without compensation. Other ethnic groups often treated the Baka as inferior and sometimes subjected them to unfair and exploitative labor practices. The government continued long-standing efforts to provide birth certificates and national identity cards to Baka. Nonetheless, most Baka did not have these documents, and efforts to reach them were impeded by the difficulty in reaching homes deep in the forest.

There were credible reports from NGOs that the Mbororo, nomadic pastoralists living mostly in the North, East, Adamawa, and Northwest Regions, continued to be subject to harassment, sometimes with the complicity of administrative or judicial authorities. The Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association indicated that the Anglophone crisis negatively affected the Mbororo community. According to the association program coordinator, between January and September 14, separatists were responsible for the killing of 10 Mbororos in the Northwest Region. Separatists reportedly burglarized 63 homes, burned down one house, and kidnapped 11 persons for ransom for a total of 7.61 million CFA (\$13,800) during the same period.

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship through their parents, but not through birth in the country's territory; the responsibility to register a child's birth falls upon parents. Birth registration was provided on a nondiscriminatory basis, but many births went unregistered because children were not always born in health facilities. Also, many parents faced problems in reaching local government offices. A diagnostic study and the complementary evaluation of the civil status system conducted in 2016 revealed that the low level of birth registration was due to a multitude of factors, including administrative obstacles linked, among other things, to the nonfunctioning of civil status centers or their remoteness from the populations. In addition existing regulations that established the free declaration and registration of births were not respected in health facilities and in civil registration centers. Ignorance of laws and regulations and the neglect of the populations also contributed to inadequate birth registration. Children without birth certificates were unable to register for official examinations to enter secondary school or secure legally required identity documents.

Offices of Civil Affairs were located within municipal councils in each subdivision, and in many rural or remote areas, they were in civil status centers. In some jurisdictions parents would need to travel more than 15 miles to find an operational civil administrative office. Parents have until 90 days after a child is born to register the birth. After that time, a birth may only be registered by appealing to the local district prosecutor. To adjudicate and notarize official birth documents, a family would be expected to pay 15,000 to 25,000 CFA francs (\$27-\$46) and face bureaucratic obstacles, which most families from rural communities would struggle to afford, forcing many parents to abandon the process early. The president of the court sets the price to execute summary judgements, and the price for the execution varied by division and region.

According to a Ministry of Basic Education report released in March, an estimated 36 percent of the nearly five million primary students registered for the 2020-21 academic year did not have birth certificates. On March 8, Far North Region Governor Midjiyawa Barkary issued a report in which he said 40.6 percent of primary school students in the Far North Region did not have birth certificates.

Education: The law provides for tuition-free compulsory primary education up to the age of 12. The law punishes parents with sufficient means who refuses to send their child to school with a fine. Children were generally expected to complete primary education at 12 years of age. Secondary school students had to pay tuition and other fees in addition to buying uniforms and books. This rendered secondary education unaffordable for many children.

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

During the year separatists ordered boycotts and attacked schools in the Southwest and Northwest Regions that continued to disrupt the normal school operations. According to the United Nations, two of three schools in the two regions were closed. Several teachers were killed or kidnapped during the year. On November 24, suspected separatist gunmen killed four students and one teacher in the Government Bilingual High School in Ekondi-Titi in the Southwest Region. At the beginning of the school year, school attendance in rural communities remained notably lower than school attendance in urban areas.

On January 9, according to credible accounts, separatists shot and killed a school principal in Ossing, a village in Mamfe subdivision of the Southwest Region. Local reports suggest the principal was attacked and shot in his neighborhood after returning from school that day. On February 2, armed separatists stormed Bamessing in Ngoketunjia division of the Northwest Region, killed two civilians for allegedly being traitors. On March 8, separatist fighters attacked a bus transporting passengers out of the Northwest Region at Akum, killing four civilians and wounding several others.

UNICEF reported that on June 6, members of an armed group attacked a religious center in Mamfe, Southwest Region, killing a 12-year-old boy and wounding a 16-year-old boy.

Child Abuse: The law prohibits various forms of child abuse, including but not limited to assault, indecency, kidnapping, forced labor, rape, sexual harassment, and situations where one parent refuses to disclose the identity of the other parent to the child. Despite these legal provisions, child abuse remained a problem. Children continued to suffer corporal punishment, both within families and at school. Boko Haram continued to abduct children for use as child soldiers or as suicide bombers (see section 1.g.), and adults, including persons associated with the government sexually assaulted children.

According to an article published in the daily newspaper *La Nouvelle Expression* on June 21, approximately 30 cases of rape of minors were recorded in 17 months in the country. The article followed a survey conducted by Griote TV on the Day of the African Child. The authors claimed that between January and May, they identified at least 30 cases of child sexual abuse, with the survivors between three and 13 years of age, and that after investigation and discussions with families, it was clear that most of the sexual assaults involved members of the government security forces.

As of July 2, the West Region-based Association pour le developpement economique et la gouvernante locale (ADEGEL) claimed it documented 76 cases of physical violence perpetrated by men against young girls ages 12 to 14 in the Noum division, including 34 cases in Foubot and 42 in Koptamou. ADEGEL highlighted the case of a 13-year-old girl who was gang-raped in mid-April by five men. Due to injuries suffered in the abuse, the survivor underwent restorative surgery with assistance from ADEGEL. The organization was in the process of compiling a file to share with the prosecutor's office, but as of October ADEGEL members had been unable to identify the assailants.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage is 18. Despite the law, according to UNICEF's 2018 child marriage data, 31 percent of women between ages 20 to 24 were married before age 18 and 11 percent were married before age 15. Early and forced marriages, as well as abusive "temporal marriages," were more prevalent in the northern part of the country and

some parts of the West Region, especially in the Noun division. As of July 2, ADEGEL stated it had documented 12 cases of forced marriage in Foubot and petitioned the Court of First Instance to nullify the marriages. In March, however, the case files were completely destroyed after the court was set on fire following the death of an inmate.

Servitas Cameroon, a nonprofit organization which aims to support and empower women and young girls, documented the case of a 13-year-old girl forcefully married to a man who was more than four times her age at the time. She endured eight years of violence and isolation, which resulted in the birth of three children before she reached the age of 18, when a marriage certificate was issued. A consortium of civil society organizations, including Servitas and Women's Counseling and Information Center, assisted the survivor. The NGO consortium reported that they were pursuing legal action to nullify the marriage, and that the case was pending before the Wouri High Court in Douala.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation and the sale, offering, or procuring for child sex trafficking and practices related to child pornography. The country's legal framework requires a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offense and therefore does not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The law does not set a minimum age for consensual sex. According to anecdotal reports, traffickers exploited children younger than 18 in sex trafficking, although no statistics were available. Anecdotal reports suggested the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions had contributed to a dramatic increase in child sex trafficking and number of early pregnancies, especially in areas with IDPs. Reports suggested the Bonaberi neighborhood in Douala was a hub for the sexual exploitation of underage IDP girls.

Displaced Children: Many displaced children continued to live on the streets of urban centers, although the number was in decline because of stringent security measures and a law that criminalizes vagrancy. According to estimates of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there were 2,170 separated children and 1,790 unaccompanied children in the Far North Region as of 2020 (Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA), December 2020, IOM), including IDPs, returnees, out-of-camp refugees, and other migrants (see also sections 2.e. and 2.f.). During the year, among 3,369 households interviewed, 5 percent of 18,000 children were either unaccompanied or separated (*Return Intention Survey*, November 2021, IOM). These children faced many obstacles including limited access to school, health, and protection.

Thousands of children were affected by the humanitarian crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. These children faced significant abuses of their rights by armed forces and nonstate armed actors alike. According to the August MSNA, there were approximately 769 unaccompanied and 8,320 separated children in the Northwest and Southwest Regions among the displaced population. These children faced many problems, including limited access to school, health care, protection, and risk of being recruited into armed groups. The government had not established structures to ensure that internally displaced children were protected from recruitment by nonstate armed groups and terrorist organizations.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

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

Trafficking in Persons

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

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities could not access education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. A 2010 law provides additional protection to persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities. The protections under the law cover access to education and vocational training, employment, health services, information and cultural activities, communications, buildings, sports and leisure, transportation, housing, and other state services. Some infrastructure projects were made accessible to persons with mobility challenges. Public education is free for persons with disabilities and children born of parents with disabilities. Initial vocational training, medical treatment, and employment must be provided "when possible," and public assistance "when needed." The government did not enforce these provisions effectively.

The government did not provide government information and communication in accessible formats.

The constitution protects the rights of all persons, including persons with disabilities. There were no reports of police or other government officials inciting, perpetrating, or condoning violence against persons with disabilities during the year.

Many children with disabilities attended school with peers without disabilities. The government introduced inclusive education in many schools and reviewed the curriculum of teacher training colleges to include training in inclusive education skills. Other children with disabilities continued to attend separate schools, such as the Bulu Blind Center in Buea and the Yaounde Special School for Hearing-impaired Children.

Persons with disabilities did not receive adequate protection in conflict zones.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

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

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

On February 12, a representative from Working for Our Wellbeing (WFW), an organization based in Douala working on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) matters reported that authorities had arrested six LGBTQI+ persons, including four transgender women, between November 2020 and February 8. Mildred Loic Njeuken, known as "Shakiro," and Roland Moute, who is also known as "Patricia," were arrested together on February 8. The WFW report added that every detainee experienced varying degrees of physical abuse, harassment, and threats of sexual violence from inmates and guards while inside New Bell Prison in Douala. While the charges against all but Shakiro and Patricia were dropped, the latter two were convicted in May on charges of attempted homosexuality and failure to display a national identity card, and they were sentenced to five years in prison. They were released on bail in July, and as of December the case was before the Court of Appeal in Bonanjo. On August 7, a group of young men violently assaulted "Shakiro" and "Patricia" after they had been released on bail pending an appeal in mid-July. Images and video footage found circulating on social media showed a group of young men violently attacking and disrobing the two survivors on the street. Police reportedly did not officially document the attack in an official report after arriving on the scene, although they escorted the two to the hospital.

In a July 1 report on gender-based violence, Alternative-Cameroon documented the case of a 33-year-old man who was illegally detained at the Douala New Bell Central Prison. On January 24, according to the report, residents in the Douala neighborhood accused the man of being gay, beat him, and called the Douala 10th police district. Police came and arrested the man whom the individuals accused of being homosexual and remanded him for less than 24 hours before referring him to New Bell Central prison, where he spent three months without appearing in court. The survivor lost his job and was evicted from his home.

Consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults is illegal and punishable with imprisonment lasting anywhere between six months and five years plus a fine.

LGBTQI+ human rights organizations such as the Cameroonian Foundation for AIDS, Humanity First Cameroon, Alternatives-Cameroon, the National Observatory of the Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons and Their Defenders, Colibri, Working for Our Wellbeing, and others continued to report arbitrary arrests of LGBTQI+ persons. LGBTQI+ individuals continued to face significant stigma, violence, and discrimination from their families, communities, and the government.

In one instance on February 24, highlighted in the April HRW report, police officers raided the office of Colibri, a health and human rights organization that provides HIV prevention and treatment services in Bafoussam, West Region. Authorities arrested 13 persons on attempted homosexuality charges, including seven from the Colibri staff. Police released all 13 between February 26 and 27. Three of those who were arrested said police beat at least three Colibri staff members at the police station and threatened everyone who had been arrested. They added that police interrogated them without the presence of a lawyer and forced them to sign statements, which they were not allowed to read. One of them, a 22-year-old transgender woman, said, "Police told us we are devils, not humans, not normal. They beat up a transwoman in front of me." Police also forced one of the 13 arrested, a 26-year-old transgender woman, to undergo an HIV test and a forced anal exam at a health center in Bafoussam on February 25. She reportedly told HRW that "the doctor was uncomfortable with performing the procedure but said he had to do the examination because the prosecutor's office asked for it."

On April 14, HRW reported that security forces since February had arbitrarily arrested, beat, or threatened at least 24 persons, including a 17-year-old boy, for alleged consensual same-sex conduct or gender nonconformity. Between February 17 and April 8, HRW said it interviewed 18 persons, including five who had been detained, three lawyers, and 10 members of LGBTQI+ NGOs in relation to the aforementioned case.

The constitution prescribes equal rights for all citizens; however, the law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons in housing, employment, nationality, and access to government services such as health care. Security forces sometimes harassed persons based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including individuals found with condoms and lubricants. Fear of exposure affected individuals' willingness to access HIV and AIDS services, and several HIV positive men who had sex with men reportedly were partnered with women, in part to conceal their sexual orientation. Anecdotal reports suggested some discrimination occurred in places of employment with respect to sexual orientation.

LGBTQI+ organizations could not officially register as such and thus sought registration either as general human rights organizations or as health-focused organizations. Many LGBTQI+ organizations found that operating health programs, particularly HIV programs, shielded them from potential harassment or shutdown rather than promoting advocacy for LGBTQI+ persons as their primary mission.

According to multiple reports, on November 15, an intersex person was sexually assaulted, beaten, and threatened by a violent mob in Yaounde. The attack, which lasted for several hours, was filmed and later posted on social media. In a press statement issued on November 26, the minister of communication condemned the publication of explicit videos, adding that while homosexuality was against the law, violence against those suspected of homosexuality was also illegal. A man allegedly connected to the attack was arrested and released 48 hours later. A complaint was filed with the police on behalf of the survivor.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Several cases of vigilante action and arson attacks were reported involving arbitrary killings and destruction of both public and private property. According to multiple media reports, the mutilated body of Fouodji Flaubert, a person with albinism who went missing days earlier, was found dead on August 29 in the Bafoussam neighborhood of Djeleng 2, West Region. According to Bafoussam I police district officials, as reported by *La Nouvelle Expression* on September 1, Fouodji's body was missing certain organs. Waffo Marie Madeleine, the president of the Association of Albino Women of Cameroon, said in April and May that she had received information from unidentified individuals who were planning to abduct persons with albinism in Bafoussam. She reportedly passed the information on to the minister of social affairs, who promised to take some precautions at the level of the ministry to safeguard its citizens.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the rights of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct strikes, albeit with significant restrictions. The right does not apply to defined groups of workers, including defense and national security personnel, prison administration civil servants, and judicial and legal personnel. The law also prohibits antiunion discrimination and requires the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. Statutory limitations and other practices substantially restricted these rights. 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 if closely related, sectors. The law requires that unions register with the government, have a minimum of 20 members, and formalize the union by submitting a constitution and bylaws. Founding members must also have clean police records. Those who form a union and carry out union activities without registration may be fined. More than 100 trade unions and 12 trade union confederations were in operation, including one public sector confederation. Trade unions or associations of public servants may not join a foreign occupational or labor organization without prior authorization from the minister of territorial administration, who is responsible for "supervising public freedoms."

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. The law does not apply to the agricultural or informal sectors, which included most of the workforce.

Legal strikes or lockouts may be called only after conciliation and arbitration procedures are exhausted. Workers who ignore procedures to conduct a strike may be dismissed or fined. Free industrial zones are subject to some labor laws, but there are several exceptions. The employers have the right to determine salaries according to productivity, the free negotiation of work contracts, and the automatic issuance of work permits for foreign workers. Some laws intended to target terrorists may impose harsh legal penalties on legitimate trade union activity.

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

Collective agreements are binding until three months after a party has given notice to terminate. As in the previous year, there were no reported allegations that the minister of labor and social security negotiated collective agreements with trade unionists who had nothing to do with the sectors concerned and did not involve trade union confederations that prepared the draft agreements.

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

As in 2020, workers' representatives said some workers were granted technical leave because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which took a heavy toll on most businesses. Several strikes were announced. Some were called off after successful negotiations, others were carried out peacefully, while others faced some degree of repression.

The National Union of Higher Education Teachers (SYNES) called on its members to suspend lectures from January 25 to 30. University teachers were protesting the nonpayment of the quarterly modernization and research bonuses, an incentive they had been receiving since 2009. They also protested the new method of evaluating undergraduate students, in particular the introduction of multiple-choice questions, which they deemed to be inappropriate. In an interview posted on YouTube, Jeannette Wagging, SYNES' communications secretary, acknowledged that authorities had begun making payments, but she said the union would continue to make sure all teachers received bonuses.

On June 10, the leaders of the country's national public transport unions issued a notice to strike beginning on July 12. According to the union leaders, commercial motorbike riders lacked sufficient insurance coverage to compensate vehicles damaged during accidents. Also, unions protested the increase in the cost of insurance for cab drivers from 40,000 CFA francs (\$73) to 60,000 CFA francs (\$109). Trade unions denounced the fact that urban buses were paying the same taxes as interurban buses. After a series of consultations at the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, the union leaders suspended the strike to give the government more time to address the problems.

The General Union of Transporters of Cameroon also announced a strike on the transport of goods in the commercial trucking sector beginning on September 6. The truckers were protesting what they characterized as illegal surcharges.

On September 22, during the 28th and 29th sessions of the Consultation and Monitoring Committee of the Social Dialogue, the minister of labor and social security announced that 102,000 workers had lost their jobs because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The minister invited the social partners to make proposals to him for the use of COVID-19 pandemic funds to limit the effects of the coronavirus in the world of work.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The constitution and law prohibit all forms of forced and compulsory labor. The law prohibits slavery, exploitation, and debt bondage and voids any agreement in which violence was used to obtain consent. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other serious crimes. The law also extends culpability for all crimes to accomplices and corporate entities. Although the statutory penalties are severe, the government did not enforce the law effectively, in part due to a lack of capacity to investigate trafficking, limited labor inspection and remediation resources, and regular conflation of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. In addition due to the length and expense of criminal trials and the lack of protection available to victims participating in investigations, many victims of forced or compulsory labor resorted to accepting out-of-court settlements. Anecdotal reports of hereditary servitude imposed on former slaves in some chiefdoms in the North Region continued. Many members of the Kirdi, a predominately Christian and animist ethnic group enslaved by the Muslim Fulani in the 1800s, continued to work for traditional Fulani rulers for compensation in room and board and generally low and unregulated wages, while their children were free to pursue schooling and work of their choosing. Kirdi were also required to pay local chiefdom taxes to the Fulani, as were all other subjects. The combination of low wages and high taxes (although legal) effectively constituted forced labor. While technically free to leave, many Kirdi remained in the hierarchical and authoritarian system because of a lack of viable alternative options.

Anecdotal reports suggested that in the South and East Regions, some Baka, including children, continued to be subjected to unfair labor practices by Bantu farmers who hired the Baka at exploitative wages to work on their farms during the harvest seasons.

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

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits most of the worst forms of child labor and sets 14 as the minimum age of employment. The law prohibits children from working at night or longer than eight hours per day. It also outlines tasks children younger than 18 may not legally perform, including moving heavy objects, undertaking dangerous and unhealthy tasks, working in confined areas, and commercial sex. Employers are required to provide skills training to children between the ages of 14 and 18. Because compulsory education ends at the age of 12, children who were not in school and not yet 14 were particularly vulnerable to child labor. Laws relating to hazardous work for children younger than 18 are not comprehensive, since they do not include prohibitions on work underwater or at dangerous heights. Children engaged in hazardous agricultural work, including cocoa production. The law provides penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment for those who violate child labor laws. These penalties were commensurate with those for comparable crimes, such as kidnapping.

Children younger than the minimum age of employment tended to be involved in agriculture, fishing and livestock, the service industry, sex work, and artisanal gold mining. Children in refugee or IDP camps were particularly vulnerable to the worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation. Reports also indicated some internally displaced children from the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions were exploited in farm work, and children who escaped child and early marriages often ended up as survivors of sexual exploitation, especially in the Noun division of the West region. There were reports of underage children associated with nonstate armed groups in the Far North, Southwest, and Northwest Regions. In agriculture children were exposed to hazardous conditions, including climbing trees, handling heavy loads, using machetes, and handling agricultural chemicals. Children in artisanal gold mines and gravel quarries spent long hours filling and transporting wheelbarrows of sand or gravel, breaking stones without eye protection, and digging and washing the soil or mud, sometimes in stagnant water, to extract minerals. These activities left children vulnerable to physical injuries, waterborne diseases, and exposure to mercury. Children worked as street vendors; in fishing, where they were exposed to hazardous conditions; and largely alongside families and rather than for formal employers. Children were subjected to forced begging as *talibes* in Quranic schools.

Traffickers exploited children in domestic service and restaurants, as well as begging or vending on streets and highways. Additionally, criminal elements forced children to work in artisanal gold mining, gravel quarries, fishing, animal breeding, and agriculture (on onion, cotton, tea, and cocoa plantations), as well as in urban transportation assisting bus drivers and in construction to run errands, work, or provide security. Media reports indicated exploitation in the country's fishing sector was widespread. Extremist groups, such as Boko Haram, forced children to work as scouts, porters, and cooks.

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

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law contains no specific provisions against or penalties for discrimination, but the constitution in its preamble provides that all persons shall have equal rights and obligations and that every person shall have the right and the obligation to work.

Discrimination in employment and occupation allegedly occurred with respect to ethnicity, HIV status, disability, gender, and sexual orientation, and gender identity especially in the private sector. There were legal restrictions on women's employment in occupations deemed arduous or "morally inappropriate" and in industries including mining, construction, factories, and energy. Members of ethnic groups often gave preferential treatment to other members of their group in business. Persons with disabilities reportedly found it difficult to secure and access employment. There were no reliable reports of discrimination against internal migrant or foreign migrant workers, although anecdotal reports suggested such workers were vulnerable to unfair working conditions. The government took no action to eliminate or prevent discrimination and kept no records of incidents of discrimination.

Credible reports of discrimination against workers with disabilities persisted. For example, Bonfeu Eric Michel, a visually impaired citizen and disability rights activist, complained to the president that despite his qualifications and antidiscrimination laws, multiple state-owned and private companies refused to hire him due to his visual impairment.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

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

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

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for enforcement of the minimum wage and workhour standards but did not enforce the law. Penalties for violations of the law were not commensurate with those for comparable crimes, such as negligence. The government more than doubled the total number of labor inspectors, but the number was still insufficient, and the ministry lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government sets health and safety standards in the workplace. The minister in charge of labor matters establishes the list of occupational diseases in consultation with the National Commission on Industrial Hygiene and Safety. Ministry inspectors and occupational health physicians are responsible for monitoring health and safety standards.

The regulations were not enforced in the informal sector. The labor code also mandates that every enterprise and establishment of any kind provide medical and health services for its employees. This stipulation was not enforced.

Informal Sector: According to International Labor Organization estimates as of December 2020, the employment situation in the country could be characterized by the large size of its informal economy. The International Labor Organization further indicated that informal workers, who represented 90 percent of all employed, were mostly women. Sectors where informal employment was most prevalent included artisanal mining, petty trade, hunting and fishing, and handicraft. The informal economy was mostly unregulated.

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