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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cameroon

CAMEROON (Tier 2)

The Government of Cameroon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore Cameroon remained on Tier 2. These efforts included increasing investigations and convictions of traffickers. The government increased international cooperation on cross-border trafficking investigations and drafted a new National Action Plan (NAP), pending final adoption. The government drafted a handover protocol, in collaboration with an international organization, for the transfer of children allegedly associated with armed groups, including potential trafficking victims, to protection actors. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government prosecuted fewer traffickers and did not identify any trafficking victims. Protection services for victims remained limited. The government did not amend its anti-trafficking law to remove the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion for child sex trafficking and to clearly distinguish between trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling crimes. Despite serious and sustained allegations of official complicity in trafficking crimes, the government did not report any law enforcement action against allegedly complicit officials.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Using the SOPs for victim identification and referral to care, proactively identify trafficking victims, including by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, and train officials on their use. * Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, including of complicit officials, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. * Amend the anti-trafficking

law to remove the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion for child sex trafficking crimes and to make a clear distinction between human trafficking and migrant smuggling. * Strengthen protection services for trafficking victims, including by providing specialized services to trafficking victims and providing funding or in-kind assistance to NGOs and international organizations providing services. * Cease the unlawful recruitment or use of children and demobilize children from all armed groups while providing adequate protection and reintegration support. * Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as arresting sex trafficking victims for commercial sex. * Finalize an updated NAP and allocate resources devoted to its implementation. * Train law enforcement officers on the indicators of trafficking, victim-centered and trauma-informed trafficking investigations, the difference between human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and computer forensics to investigate online exploitation. * Implement a systemic victim-witness assistance program to increase protective services for victims participating in the criminal justice process and prevent re-traumatization. * Finalize and implement the handover protocol for children associated with armed groups in collaboration with international organizations. * Increase training for labor inspectors on victim identification and criminal referral of forced child labor cases. * Increase funding allocated for anti-trafficking activities, including inter-ministerial committee (IMC) operations. * Conduct activities to raise public awareness of online exploitation and human trafficking. * Expand the investigation of labor recruiters and agencies suspected of fraudulent recruitment, including unlicensed recruiters and intermediaries, and hold persons complicit in trafficking criminally accountable. * Continue to develop a robust and comprehensive data collection system, disaggregating between sex and labor trafficking cases to capture government-wide anti-trafficking efforts.

PROSECUTION

The government increased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law criminalized some forms of sex trafficking and all forms of labor trafficking. Inconsistent with international law, Cameroon's legal framework continued to require a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking crime, and therefore did not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The law prescribed penalties of 10 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 to 1 million Central African francs (CFA) (\$84 to \$1,690), which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to some forms of sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. If the trafficking crime involved a victim who was 15 or younger, the penalties increased to 15 to 20 years in prison and a fine of 100,000 to 10 million CFA (\$170 to \$16,850). The law prescribed separate penalties for debt bondage, which ranged from five to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 to 500,000 CFA (\$17 to \$840) and were also sufficiently stringent. The law was published in French and English, the two official languages of the

government. The English version conflated trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling crimes by referring to trafficking in persons crimes, as defined under international law, as “slavery in persons,” while referring to migrant smuggling-related offenses as “trafficking in persons.” Increasing the potential for conflating migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons, Article 342-1 of Cameroon’s 2016 Penal Code prohibited both “trafficking in persons” and “slavery in persons.” Legislation drafted in 2012 to address victim and witness protection and correct inconsistencies with international law remained pending for the eleventh consecutive year.

Although law enforcement officials investigated and prosecuted trafficking crimes, the government did not maintain a centralized law enforcement data collection system on trafficking crimes. The lack of synchronized law enforcement efforts between the national police and the gendarmerie continued to hinder the government’s ability to disaggregate national human trafficking statistics, and likely resulted in underreported anti-trafficking statistics. The government investigated 392 cases. This compared with 44 cases investigated in 2022. The government reported initiating prosecutions of nine alleged traffickers in seven cases. This compared with prosecuting 19 alleged traffickers in an unknown number of cases in 2022. Courts convicted four traffickers with sentences ranging from three to 25 years’ imprisonment. This compared with three convictions under Section 342 (1) in 2022; all three convicted traffickers were sentenced to 20 years in prison. The national police and the gendarmerie were responsible for investigating trafficking crimes; the government did not have a dedicated unit responsible for investigating trafficking crimes. Observers assessed a dedicated unit could help strengthen law enforcement efforts and increase the number of trafficking cases referred for prosecution. In partnership with an international organization, the government established “child desks,” staffed by police trained by an international organization to respond to trafficking and related crimes involving children, in local police stations in the Northwest and Southwest regions. In addition, observers reported some police and gendarmerie stations have designated “gender desks,” staffed by officers with similar training, to identify victims of gender-based violence (GBV), including trafficking victims. Authorities continued to report ongoing insecurity in the Far North Region, as well as armed violence in the Northwest and Southwest regions, impeded law enforcement’s ability to comprehensively investigate trafficking crimes. Officials continued to report some potential cases did not move forward to prosecution because victims chose not to participate in court proceedings due to the lack of available victim-witness assistance and fear of reprisal. Due to the lack of protections and the protracted nature of criminal justice proceedings, some victims chose to settle potential trafficking cases outside the formal court system. Additionally, funding and resources for law enforcement officials remained insufficient, hindering overall anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action. Cameroonian Armed Forces recruited and used child soldiers in support roles, including children younger than the age of 15. The government did not report efforts to investigate prior allegations of government security forces sexually exploiting women in the Southwest Region or forcibly recruiting community members in the Far North Region to stand watch against Boko Haram incursions. However, observers reported the government took some disciplinary actions against security forces accused of sexually assaulting children, which may have included sex trafficking victims, resulting in one prosecution. In June 2021, the Department of State suspended for five years the A-3 visa sponsorship privileges afforded to Cameroon bilateral mission members because the government declined to waive diplomatic immunity for U.S. criminal proceedings involving mistreatment of a domestic worker and has not initiated its own prosecution. Between 2017 and 2019, a Cameroonian diplomat posted in the United States engaged in alleged criminal violations related to human trafficking. Because of diplomatic immunity, the United States could not commence prosecution, and the Government of Cameroon declined to waive immunity to allow the case to proceed. The government did not report taking any action to hold the diplomat accountable for the fourth consecutive year. The diplomat left the United States in 2021. Additionally, between 2015 and 2017, a Cameroonian diplomat posted in the United States allegedly engaged in visa fraud related to a child domestic worker. Because of diplomatic immunity, the United States could not commence prosecution, nor did the government report taking any action for the seventh consecutive year to hold the diplomat accountable. The diplomat left the United States in 2018.

The government trained police and gendarmerie officers, magistrates, social workers, and lawyers on investigations and identification and referral to care of child victims of crime, including human trafficking. The government participated in FLASH-WEKA, an international law enforcement operation led by INTERPOL and the African Union Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL) to investigate trafficking crimes. Officials collaborated with the Governments of Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria on cross-border trafficking investigations.

PROTECTION

The government decreased victim protection efforts. The government did not maintain comprehensive statistics and did not report identifying any trafficking victims. This compared with 12 identified victims and 23 potential trafficking victims identified in 2022. NGOs identified 26 trafficking victims. The government continued to implement its victim identification and referral SOPs, but it did not report whether the SOPs

were consistently used. The government continued to proactively screen vulnerable populations, particularly migrant workers traveling through airports, for trafficking indicators and maintained anti-trafficking units at Yaoundé and Douala's international airports.

The government maintains seven Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS)-run centers for victims of crime, including trafficking victims, with the capacity to provide assistance to trafficking victims, including shelter, basic needs, psycho-social support, health care, and family reunification assistance; the government did not report whether any trafficking victims received services. MINAS had the authority to admit children subjected to abuse – including trafficking victims – to government institutions for vulnerable children, which offered shelter, food, medical as well as psychological care, education, vocational training, and family tracing. The government continued to provide some support, including building costs, to NGOs that provided care to trafficking victims. The government also provided subsidies to MINAS-partnered organizations that provided temporary shelter to trafficking survivors, including women and children. Despite these available services, the government continued to lack sufficient resources to adequately protect trafficking victims. The government, in partnership with an international organization, repatriated 63 Cameroonians in Tunisia; the government did not report if these individuals included potential trafficking victims. The government coordinated with the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons in Nigeria to repatriate two Nigerian child trafficking victims in Cameroon.

Due to the limited use of victim identification procedures, authorities may have inadvertently arrested some unidentified trafficking victims. The government, in partnership with an international organization, drafted a handover protocol to refer child soldiers to protection actors; the draft handover protocol remained pending with the Prime Minister at the end of the reporting period. The government did not have a formal policy to provide victim-witness assistance to victims participating in investigations and prosecutions and did not provide victim-witness assistance to any victims cooperating in investigations or prosecutions, despite reports indicating traffickers often threatened victims during trials. Victims could obtain restitution from convicted traffickers through criminal proceedings or seek damages through civil suits; however, the government did not report whether courts awarded any restitution. The government could grant temporary residency status to foreign victims who, if deported, may face hardship or retribution; however, it did not report providing this accommodation.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts. The IMC continued to lead the government's anti-trafficking efforts and convened at least twice. The government had a 2021-2024 NAP. The government reported it

completed its review of an updated NAP, initiated in the previous reporting period, which was pending adoption at the end of the reporting period. In partnership with a labor union, the government trained English-speaking journalists on issues related to human trafficking. The IMC organized awareness-raising activities in schools for students, teachers, and administrative staff and reported providing in-kind and financial resources to NGO-run awareness campaigns. In partnership with an international organization and NGOs, the government, conducted awareness campaigns on the dangers of child labor in the mining sector. Authorities also advertised its anti-trafficking campaign and posted information at airports, and transportation hubs in Yaounde and Douala. The government continued its awareness campaign to eliminate child labor in the cocoa sector. MINAS continued to operate a trafficking-specific hotline; the government did not report if any victims were identified or if cases were referred to law enforcement due to hotline calls. The Cameroon Human Rights Commission and the gendarmerie also operated hotlines to report human rights violations and abuses, including human trafficking.

In partnership with an international organization, the government trained security forces on child soldier-related issues and reporting procedures to prevent the recruitment or use of children. The government did not effectively regulate foreign labor recruiters or report taking measures to hold fraudulent labor recruiters accountable. The government did not report auditing any companies or private labor placement offices. Observers reported Cameroonians frequently used unauthorized recruiters to seek employment abroad, which increased their vulnerability to trafficking. The government initiated negotiations on bilateral labor agreements with France, Belgium, and Saudi Arabia to enhance protections of migrant workers. The government continued to conduct labor inspections, particularly in the mining sector, to enforce laws against child labor; however, the government did not report identifying any trafficking victims during these inspections or investigating any potential violations.

The lack of birth certificates increased the vulnerability of individuals to trafficking. A previous report estimated at least 1.6 million children enrolled in schools did not have birth certificates. An NGO attributed the lack of birth certificates to internal and external problems faced by the government such as poor record keeping, staff shortage, and the violence and insecurity in the Northwest and Southwest regions. The government reported conducting three months of pre-deployment anti-trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers. The government reported providing anti-trafficking training to 106 members of its diplomatic personnel. The government made some efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, including criminalizing elements such as soliciting. The government launched an awareness campaign

targeting government officials, community leaders, and hotel managers on extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Cameroon, and traffickers exploit victims from Cameroon abroad. According to a 2022 government study, traffickers use the Gulf of Guinea to transport Cameroonian children to Côte d'Ivoire and exploit them in labor trafficking in cocoa farming. Traffickers also bring Malian, Burkinabe, Beninese, or Togolese children to Cameroon via the Gulf of Guinea and exploit them in labor trafficking on farms in the North, West, and Northwest regions of Cameroon. High unemployment rates and economic uncertainty continued to drive many individuals, especially women, to contemplate economic migration under questionable circumstances, leaving them vulnerable to traffickers. Members of the Tupuri ethnic group and seasonal workers on sugar cane plantations in Northern Cameroon are vulnerable to labor trafficking. Government officials, NGO representatives, and media outlets report more than one million IDPs face an increased risk of human trafficking due to insecurity in some regions, a diminished police and judicial presence, and deteriorated economic and educational conditions. Several years of intermittent school closures in the Northwest and Southwest regions have resulted in some parents sending their children to stay with intermediaries who, instead of providing education and safety, exploit the children in domestic servitude.

Observers report vulnerable populations such as orphans, persons with disabilities, victims of GBV, and the marginalized Mbororo community in Bali Nyonga, Northwest Region, remained at risk of trafficking. Avenue Kennedy in Yaoundé remains a gathering point for children who use the streets as a source of livelihood; traffickers may exploit this population in human trafficking. Traffickers often use the promise of education or a better life in urban areas to convince parents in rural areas to entrust their children to intermediaries who then exploit the children in sex or labor trafficking. Observers reported children in privately-run artisanal gold mines owned or operated by People's Republic of China (PRC) entities are vulnerable to labor trafficking. PRC workers may be exploited on gold mining worksites owned or operated by PRC entities. Criminals coerce women, IDPs, children experiencing homelessness, and orphans into sex and labor trafficking throughout the country. Some labor recruiters lure children from economically disadvantaged families to cities with the prospect of employment and then exploit victims in sex or labor trafficking. Traffickers exploit children in labor trafficking in domestic service, agriculture (onion, cotton, tea, palm oil, and cocoa plantations), restaurants, street vending, sand extraction from rivers, and forced begging. A 2022 government study reported criminals transport children through Cameroon en route to Gabon, where traffickers exploit them in

domestic servitude. Media reporting indicates there is labor trafficking in Cameroon's fishing sector.

Foreign business owners and herders force children from neighboring countries, including Benin, the Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria, to labor in spare parts shops or cattle grazing in northern Cameroon; many traffickers share the nationality of their victims. International Organizations reported there were 1,036,774 IDPs and 658,544 IDP returnees in Cameroon as of March 2024, a slight decrease from 1,209,838 reported in 2023. There were approximately 477,715 refugees and asylum seekers in the country as of March 2024. Traffickers may exploit IDPs and refugees because of their economic instability and sometimes limited access to formal justice. Boko Haram's activities on the border with Nigeria continued to displace many of these refugees. There continued to be reports of hereditary slavery in northern chiefdoms.

Observers previously reported government security forces engaged in commercial sex with women in the Southwest Region divisions of Ndiang, Buea, Ekona, and Muyuka, using food insecurity and their authority as leverage. Observers reported Boko Haram continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers, including girls, in its attacks on civilian and military targets in the northern part of the country. Some community neighborhood watch groups, known as vigilance committees, may also use and recruit children in operations against Boko Haram and other non-state armed groups. Separatists in the Northwest and Southwest regions recruited and used child soldiers in combat roles and to gather intelligence, according to observers. Observers reported Russian authorities recruited and used Cameroonian undocumented migrants in Russia in combat and support roles in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine; authorities reportedly offered the migrants the option to enlist as an alternative to detention and deportation, but observers noted authorities required the migrants to sign a contract in a language they did not understand, did not provide a "defined period" of military service in the contract, and did not provide the promised salaries or training to some of the recruits.

Traffickers exploit Cameroonians from disadvantaged social strata, particularly from rural areas, in sex and labor trafficking in the Middle East (especially Kuwait and Lebanon), Thailand, Europe (including Switzerland and Cyprus), the United States, and other African countries (including Benin and Nigeria). Most Cameroonians exploited abroad are between the ages of 20 and 38 and come from the Northwest, Southwest, Littoral, Center, South, and West regions. Fraudulent labor brokers recruit some Cameroonian women for domestic work in the Middle East, where traffickers exploit them in sex trafficking or domestic servitude. Traffickers reportedly exploit internally displaced women and children from conflict-affected areas in Cameroon, including the northwestern region.

Trafficking networks generally include local community members, including religious leaders and trafficking victims who have become perpetrators. These networks advertise jobs through the internet, as well as other media, and recruit and sell other Cameroonians directly to families in need of domestic workers. Traffickers increasingly use social media and messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, to recruit victims through fake websites, highlighting opportunities in trades such as the fashion industry, modeling, entertainment, education, and information technology. Cameroonians were especially vulnerable to online forms of exploitation in Benin, Ghana, and Burkina Faso. Advocates report intermediaries often operate with discretion, directing victims to travel to the Middle East through neighboring countries, including Nigeria. International organizations, NGOs, and migrants report Cameroonian trafficking networks in Morocco coerce women into sex trafficking.

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