

Cameroon: ‘Disappeared’ Activist Resurfaces with Marks of Torture

Release Cotta, Ensure Access to Medical Care, Investigate Abuse Allegations



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Ramon Cotta (right), born Yves Kibouy Bershu, and also known as Steve Akam, with his lawyer Hippolyte Tiakouang Meli, on August 20, 2024, in military court in Yaoundé, Cameroon. © 2024 Private

(Nairobi) – [Cameroon’s](#) authorities and security forces forcibly disappeared Ramon Cotta, a social media activist, and apparently tortured him, Human Rights Watch said today. Cotta, born Yves Kibouy Bershu, has been living in Gabon for the past 10 years, where he also went by the name of Steve Akam. He is known for his [TikTok videos](#) in which he criticizes the Cameroonian authorities.

On August 20, 2024, lawyers representing Cotta told Human Rights Watch that they had [located](#) him in a security cell of the military court in Yaoundé, Cameroon’s capital, paralyzed on his left side and with “severe visual impairments,” following torture in detention. The last time Cotta had been seen was in a [video](#) circulated on social media on July 21, where he stood handcuffed and surrounded by members of the Cameroonian police at a [border post](#) between Gabon and Cameroon, in the Cameroonian town of Kye-Ossi. The authorities should immediately release Cotta, ensure that he urgently has access to adequate and appropriate medical care, and investigate his apparent torture and inhuman and degrading treatment in detention.

“There are worrying reports that Cotta may already have lost his sight and ability to walk properly as a result of torture, so prompt action is immediately needed,” said [Ilaria Allegrozzi](#), senior Sahel researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Cameroonian authorities should ensure that he urgently gets access to appropriate and adequate medical care, and thoroughly investigate Cotta’s apparent torture.”

Cotta’s lawyers said the Gabonese police arrested their client in Libreville, Gabon’s capital, on July 19 at about 10 a.m., and held him incommunicado in an unidentified location until July 21, when they handed him over to the Cameroonian authorities. The authorities then took him to the Directorate General for External Research (Direction Générale de la Recherche Extérieure, or

DGRE), the headquarters of Cameroon's intelligence services in Yaoundé. His lawyers said that on July 24, Cotta was transferred to the State Defense Secretariat (Secrétariat d'Etat à la défense), the headquarters of the National Gendarmerie, also in Yaoundé, where he is still being held.

Cotta's lawyers said DGRE members interrogated Cotta twice, and tortured him, including with serious beatings during one of the interrogations, and subjected him to other inhuman and degrading treatment.

"Cotta told us that DGRE agents tied his hands and feet and walked over him repeatedly, and that they beat him multiple times," said Hippolyte Tiakouang Meli, one of Cotta's lawyers. "He also reported that he was held in a room where he was exposed to very bright lights through a projector, which caused him serious eye issues."

Cotta's lawyers said their client has been charged with acts of terrorism, insurrection, financing of terrorism, arms trafficking, and insulting the head of state and members of the government. They said he was not taken before a judge, but instead before the military prosecutor twice. "The first time, we were not informed," said Meli. "The second time, on August 20, we were informed and could speak with our client." Cameroonian law gives the military judicial system jurisdiction over civilians charged with terrorism offences, even though this is incompatible with international norms. The UN Human Rights Committee has long called on Cameroon to reform this aspect of its laws, which violates fair trial guarantees.

On August 7, lawyers representing Cotta [had sent requests](#) for information to various Cameroonian authorities about their client's situation and whereabouts, to no avail. They had also [expressed](#) concerns that Cameroonian authorities extrajudicially returned Cotta to Cameroon from Gabon, and that he was a victim of an enforced disappearance.

The [Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network](#), a prominent Cameroonian human rights group, and [Maurice Kamto](#), the head of the main opposition party Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon, had both called on authorities to immediately reveal Cotta's whereabouts.

The Cameroonian government has for years [cracked down on opposition](#) and free speech, jailing political activists, journalists, and dissidents. Ahead of the general elections in 2025, it has increasingly restricted freedoms of expression and association.

In March, the territorial administration minister [banned two opposition coalitions](#), describing them as "clandestine movements." In June, gendarmes in N'Gaoundéré, Adamawa region, arbitrarily [rearrested](#) a prominent artist, Aboubacar Siddiki, known as Babadjo, for "insulting" a governor.

In July, the head of the Mfoundi administrative division issued a [decree](#) threatening to ban anyone insulting state institutions from the division. Also in July, members of the intelligence services in Douala, Littoral region, [arrested](#) Junior Ngombe, a social media activist, for his TikTok videos advocating democratic change. Ngombe was [released on bail](#) on July 31.

In an August 7 [statement](#) following a visit to Cameroon, Volker Türk, the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, said the process leading up to the elections will be "a key opportunity ... to ensure the free expression of political opinions."

Human Rights Watch and other human rights groups have previously documented the widespread use of [torture and incommunicado detention](#) in Cameroon's detention centers, including ungazetted detention facilities, such as [military barracks](#).

Under human rights law, all forms of torture, as well as inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment of detainees, are strictly prohibited, and Cameroonian law provides that detainees shall not be subjected to any physical or mental constraints, or to torture, and that their counsel and families should be able to visit them at any time.

“Instead of respecting the work of social media activists, Cameroon’s authorities and security forces forcibly disappeared and apparently tortured Cotta,” Allegrozzi said. “They should release him as a matter of urgency and ensure that his rights are respected.”