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Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Cameroon

Executive Summary

Cameroon is a republic dominated by a strong presidency. The president retains the power over the legislative and judicial branches of government. In October 2018 Paul Biya was reelected president in an election marked by irregularities. He has served as president since 1982. His political party—the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM)—has remained in power since its creation in 1985. New legislative and municipal elections are scheduled to take place in February 2020. Regional elections were also expected during the year, but as of late November, the president had not scheduled them.

The national police and the national gendarmerie have primary responsibility over law enforcement and maintenance of order within the country and report, respectively, to the General Delegation of National Security and to the Secretariat of State for Defense in charge of the Gendarmerie. The army is responsible for external security but also has some domestic security responsibilities and reports to the Ministry of Defense. The Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) reports directly to the president. Civilian authorities at times did not maintain effective control over the security forces.

Maurice Kamto, leader of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) party and distant runner-up in the October 2018 presidential elections, challenged the election results, claiming he won. On January 26, when Kamto and his followers demonstrated peacefully, authorities arrested him and hundreds of his followers. A crisis in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions that erupted in 2016 has led to more than 2,000 persons killed, more than 44,000 refugees in Nigeria, and more than 500,000 internally displaced persons. A five-day national dialogue to address the crisis took place from September 30 to October 4, producing a number of recommendations, including some new ones. Anglophone separatists in the Northwest and Southwest Regions as well as in the diaspora shunned the meeting. On October 3, President Biya announced the pardoning of 333 lower-level Anglophone detainees, and on October 5, the Military Tribunal ordered the release of Kamto and hundreds of his associates.

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings, by security forces, armed Anglophone separatists, and Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) fighters; forced disappearances by security forces; torture by security forces and nonstate armed groups; arbitrary detention by security forces and nonstate armed groups; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; political prisoners; significant problems with the independence of the judiciary; the worst forms of restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, and the internet, including violence, threats of violence, or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, and abuse of criminal libel laws; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; restrictions on political participation; crimes involving violence against women, in part due to government inaction; violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex (LGBTI) persons; criminalization of consensual same-sex relations; and child labor, including forced child labor.

Although the government took some steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, it did not do so systematically and rarely made the proceedings public. Some offenders, including serial offenders, continued to act with impunity.

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

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

There were several reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary and unlawful killings through excessive use of force in the execution of official duties (see also section 1.g., Abuses in Internal Conflict).

According to a credible organization, on January 29, government security forces shot and killed a nurse who was on his way to his duty station at the Oku health district in the Northwest Region. The same organization reported that in March in the Ndu subdivision of the Northwest Region, government security forces burned alive 13 civilians, including seven businesspersons who were returning from a business trip to neighboring Nigeria.

Anglophone separatists attacked and killed members of defense and security forces, as well as civilians considered loyal to the central government. For example, during the night of April 23 and the morning of April 24 in Muyuka, Southwest Region, separatist fighters decapitated and dismembered gendarme Adam Assana and scattered his body parts on the highway.

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued killing civilians, including members of so-called vigilance committees –organized groups of local residents cooperating with government forces in the Far North. On June 10, approximately 300 armed ISIS-WA jihadists attacked military positions in Darak in Logon and Shari division in the Far North Region, killing at least 16 soldiers and eight civilians, according to the defense minister.

While the government repeatedly promised to investigate abuses committed by security forces, it did not do so transparently or systematically and did not provide details. In an interview published in the April 30 edition of the daily newspaper *Le Jour*, Georges Parfait Nana, commander of the operational unit of the National Gendarmerie specialized in the fight against corruption, stated that the gendarmerie disciplined 100 gendarmes in the past year. There were reportedly more than 600 telephone calls made to a toll-free hotline number established in the previous year to report abuses by gendarmes. There were no reported punishments for human rights abuses, and the meaning of the discipline highlighted in the commander’s statement was not specified.

b. Disappearance

As in the previous year, government security forces were widely believed to be responsible for disappearances of suspected Anglophone separatists and political opponents. In a May report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the cases of 26 detainees, including two women and an 18-month-old child, who were held incommunicado at the State Secretariat for Defense for the Gendarmerie (SED) between January 2018 and January 2019, many for several months, without any contact with family, friends, or legal counsel. HRW also reported that it had received additional credible accounts since April indicating that these violations continued (see also section 1.g., Abuses in Internal Conflict).

According to credible nongovernmental organization (NGOs), the government did not readily account for most of the inmates removed from the Yaounde Kondengui and Buea prisons following July 22 and 23 riots provoked by overcrowding, poor living conditions, and extensive delays in cases going to trial. Family members of detainees were unable to obtain information about individuals’ welfare or whereabouts. On July 30, the Mandela Center described the situation as forced disappearances. Anglophone separatist leader Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe and nine other members of his entourage staged a hunger strike to protest the disappearances. That same day Communication Minister Rene Emmanuel Sadi tweeted that Mancho Bibixy and other insurgent inmates were alive and in good condition but did not disclose their location. On August 2, Sadi stated that prison authorities had transferred 244 Yaounde and 20 Buea insurgents to police and gendarmerie for questioning.

There were no developments concerning the alleged disappearance of Franklin Mowha, the president of human rights NGO Frontline Fighters for Citizen Interests. In an August 24, 2018 press release, Ekombo Favien, Frontline Fighter’s vice president, announced that Mowha had disappeared after leaving his hotel room in August 6, 2018 while on a mission to monitor human rights abuses in Kumba, Southwest Region.

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 and political opponents. Amnesty International and HRW documented several cases in which security forces severely mistreated political opponents, and others where armed separatists mistreated civilians and members of defense forces.

In a July 24 communique, the group of lawyers defending Maurice Kamto and other CRM detainees reported that during a planned peaceful protest on June 1 in Yaounde and Douala, security forces arrested 59 activists and transferred them to SED for questioning. The lawyers claimed the activists suffered from abuse. They cited beatings on the back, buttocks, and soles of the feet with machetes and wooden sticks, asphyxia by simulation of drowning, and being forced to lie in excrement. In a July 26 press release, Amnesty International stated security forces had abused the 59 opposition supporters, including six women, beating them with sticks and forcing them into humiliating positions before they were eventually released.

HRW stated it interviewed 14 detainees held at the SED, all of whom said they were tortured and held incommunicado during their time there. HRW reported hearing credible accounts that individuals had been tortured. A 29-year-old detainee from Kumba, Southwest Region, described being beaten daily with machetes and experiencing unhygienic conditions. A 30-year-old detainee from the Northwest Region told HRW of being subjected to beatings in the middle of the night.

The lawyer of Mamadou Mota, the first vice president of the CRM, told HRW that a prison guard and a gendarme had beaten his client at the Yaounde Central Prison, breaking his arm, and that he was then taken to a security facility where he was held in solitary confinement for 12 days. On July 25, Olivier Bibou Nissack, Kamto’s spokesperson, published a live video on his Facebook page alleging Mota suffered harsh treatment during his transfer from the Yaounde Central prison to the SED. In the video,

three defense lawyers who were present at Mota’s questioning that day at a facility belonging to security forces, including barrister Serges Emmanuel Chendjou, said they saw their client in bad shape, with bruises all over his body, a bandage on his head, and his left arm in a sling.

Police detained a 16-year-old boy named Ibrahim Bello at the Ombessa police station, in the Mbam and Inoubou division of Center Region. As a result of the mistreatment he received at the police station in 2017, Belo lost both legs and his left hand. As of September 30, according to the independent local NGO Mandela Center, which has consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council, the courts had not issued a verdict, nor did the policemen who allegedly committed the abuse receive any disciplinary action. Human rights organizations, under the leadership of the Mandela Center, filed a complaint with the prosecutor in Bafia and State for Defense in charge of the Gendarmerie.

The lawyers defending Maurice Kamto and his allies reported that security forces arrested more than 200 CRM members and sympathizers in various cities, removing some of them from their hospital beds, and transporting them overnight to Yaounde under inhuman conditions following the January 26 protest. Security forces handcuffed Maurice Kamto from Douala to Yaounde and refused to allow him the opportunity to use the restroom. According to the lawyers, the persons arrested were starved and detained in undisclosed areas without access to lawyers for 70 hours after arriving in Yaounde. According to credible reports, security forces tore the clothes off many detainees involved in the July 22 and 23 prison riots before transferring them from the Yaounde Central Prison to other locations. Most detainees remained naked throughout their detention at the new locations, and at least one detainee was forced to appear in court naked reportedly because no one brought them clothing.

Press reporting and NGOs indicated there were cases of rape and sexual abuse by persons associated with the government in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions. In July HRW reported that on June 21 in Kumbo, a soldier raped a 40-year-old woman. She reported that five soldiers from the group broke into her house and beat her while asking for the whereabouts of her husband. Following this, they brought her in front of her neighbor’s house and asked her and the neighbor’s wife where the separatists were. After the two women said they knew nothing about the separatists’ whereabouts, the soldiers proceeded to beat them. At some point, one of the soldiers requested a condom from a colleague and demanded the victim to go toward the bathroom located in her neighbor’s home. The soldier raped the woman, threatening to kill her if she reported the attack to anyone.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages and 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. Prison overcrowding was exacerbated by the significant increase in arrests related to the Anglophone crisis and CRM protests following the October 2018 elections. Officials held prisoners in dilapidated, colonial-era prisons. Authorities often held pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners in the same cells. In many prisons, toilets were only common pits. In some cases, women benefitted from better living conditions, including improved toilet facilities and less crowded living quarters. Prisons generally had separate wards for men, women, and children. Authorities claimed to hold the sick separately from the general prison population, but this was often not the case.

According to prison administration officials, the country had 79 operational prisons, with an intended capacity of 17,915. During the past five years, the prison population increased steadily, from 23,500 in 2013 to 30,701 in December 2017, according to the latest report published in 2018 by the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (NCHRF). In its 2018 country report on Cameroon, Amnesty International indicated that the Central Prison in Maroua, Far North Region, held 1,500 detainees, more than four times the planned capacity. Malnutrition, tuberculosis, bronchitis, malaria, hepatitis, scabies, and numerous other untreated conditions, including infections, parasites, dehydration, and diarrhea, were rampant.

In a July 23 press release following the riots at Yaounde’s Kondengui and Buea prisons, Amnesty International noted that prison conditions were dire, stating that until the situation improved there was a strong risk of further violence. During an August 2 press briefing, Justice Minister Laurent Esso announced some measures to address overcrowding: acceleration of judicial proceedings, a strengthening of disciplinary measures, modernization of the means of controlling and monitoring prisoners, decongestion of prisons with proven overcrowding, and the prohibition on the use of certain items in the prison environment.

Physical abuse by prison guards and prisoner-on-prisoner violence were problems. For instance, during the July 22 riots at the Kondengui Central Prison, at least two high-profile inmates, including former prime minister Inoni Ephraim and former health minister Olanguena Awono, sustained injuries after other prisoners attacked them for the privileged lifestyles they carried on within the prison. Corruption among prison personnel was reportedly widespread. Visitors were at times forced to bribe wardens to be granted access to inmates. Prisoners bribed wardens for special favors or treatment, including temporary freedom, cell phones, beds, and transfers to less crowded areas of the prisons. Due to their inability to pay fines, some prisoners remained incarcerated after completing their sentences or after they had received court orders of release.

Administration: Independent authorities often investigated credible allegations of mistreatment. Visitors needed formal authorization from the state counsel; without authorization, they had to bribe prison staff to communicate with inmates. Visits to Boko Haram suspects, alleged Anglophone separatists, and political opponents detained after the October 2018 presidential election were restricted. Authorities allowed prisoners and detainees to observe their religions without interference.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by some NGOs, including Buea-based Human Is Right, which in July helped identify at least one case of prolonged illegal detention. The NCHRF and the Commissions for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Archdioceses also conducted prison visits. In a February 27 press release, the NCHRF deplored the challenges in gaining access to CRM activists incarcerated at Kondengui Central Prison. With the exception of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the government restricted international humanitarian organizations’ access to prisoners.

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 person arrested of the reason. Any person illegally detained by police, the state counsel, or the examining magistrate may receive compensation. The government did not always respect these provisions.

The national police and the national gendarmerie have primary responsibility over law enforcement and maintenance of order within the country. The army is responsible for external security but also has some domestic security responsibilities. The national police, which includes public security, judicial, territorial security, and frontier police, reports to the General Delegation of National Security (DGSN), which is under the direct authority of the presidency. The national gendarmerie reports to the Secretariat of State for Defense (SED) in charge of the gendarmerie, a dedicated branch of the Ministry of Defense. In addition to the gendarmerie, the army and the army's military security unit are other components of the ministry, which is headed by a minister delegate under the direct authority of the president. The General Delegation for External Research (DGRE) serves as the intelligence agency for both internal and external security, and like the Ministry of Defense and DGSN, reports to the office of the president, resulting in strong presidential control of security forces. The Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) falls outside the purview of conventional security forces, reporting directly to the president. Civilian authorities at times did not maintain effective control over the security forces, including police and gendarmerie.

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 provides for 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 Anglophone crisis and the postelection situation. The law permits bail, allows citizens the right to appeal, and provides the right to sue for unlawful arrest, but these rights were seldom respected.

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 they paid a bribe, continued.

There were credible reports that authorities held some suspects in both the Anglophone and postelectoral crises for long periods without notifying them of the charges. For example, on August 8, the NGO Human is Right reported that during a visit to the Buea Central Prison in July, it came across a minor who had been in pretrial detention since 2017. The minor was 14 at the time of his arrest and had been kept in detention without trial for approximately two years. As of October the Fako High Court had not yet reviewed the case.

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. No comprehensive statistics were available on pretrial detainees. While updated numbers were not easy to access, the Ministry of Justice in 2015 indicated that more than 26,000 inmates occupied the 17,000 spaces available in prisons across the country. In an August 20 release following the sentencing of separatist leader Sisiku Ayuk Tabe and others to life imprisonment, the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC) indicated that 174 individuals arrested in the context of the Anglophone crisis and detained in Yaounde had been in detention there for more than one year without being presented before an investigating judge. The 2014 antiterrorism law does not require that individuals charged with terrorism be presented to an investigating judge.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, but the judiciary is under the president. In some instances, the outcomes of trials appeared influenced by the government, especially in politically sensitive cases.

Under the 2014 antiterrorism law, military tribunals have jurisdiction over terrorism and national security-related crimes. When the Military Tribunal declared in August that it was competent to handle the case against the CRM leaders, defense lawyers filed an appeal, requesting the Court of Appeal to rule whether trial of civilians before a military court conformed to the country’s constitution and international commitments. The Court of Appeals of the Center Region avoided the question, stating that the Military Tribunal was handling the matter and could not be declared incompetent. Most habeas corpus pleas before the Mfoundi High Court, Center Region, involving Anglophone separatists and CRM leaders ended with the judges maintaining the suspects in detention, despite solid evidence that the detentions deviated from the applicable laws.

On May 31, Joseph Elaba, the investigating magistrate at the Douala High Court, demanded that complainants make a deposit of five million CFA francs (\$8,500) before the court could register a case against members of security forces who shot and wounded participants of the CRM protest march in January. When the Yaounde Military Tribunal on August 20 sentenced Ayuk Tabe and nine other Anglophone leaders to life imprisonment, the military court required the victims to pay five million CFA francs (\$8,500) before they could appeal the decision.

Despite the judiciary’s partial independence from the executive and legislative branches, the president appoints all members of the bench and legal department of the judicial branch, including the president of the Supreme Court, and may dismiss them at will.

Military courts may exercise jurisdiction over civilians in a broad number of offenses including civil unrest.

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. Criminal defendants have the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges, with free assistance of an interpreter. Pretrial suspects were frequently held in the same quarters as convicted criminals. 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 Boko Haram, Anglophone separatists, or political opponents. When defendants cannot pay for their own legal defense, the court may appoint trial counsel at the public's expense; 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. 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 testimony and anonymous testimony was sometimes permitted, especially in terrorism cases. Defendants are entitled to an interpreter at no charge, but often the quality of interpretation was described as poor. Defendants may appeal convictions. In some cases, authorities did not give the victim a chance to confront the offender and present witnesses or evidence to support his or her case.

On August 31, the Cameroon Bar Association announced a five-day lawyers' strike from September 16 to 20. The lawyers said that they had consistently been denied access to their clients in various detention centers. They stated the government repeatedly violated at all phases of the judicial process the rights of the defense as enshrined in domestic and international law. They cited as key areas of concern that trials were sometimes held in a language not understood by the accused, the use of torture and inducements to extract confessions, and illegal and prolonged detentions.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of newly identified political prisoners or detainees, but no comprehensive or accurate statistics were available. Political prisoners were detained under heightened security, often in SED facilities and at the Principal and Central Prisons in Yaounde. Some were allegedly held at DGRE facilities. The government did not readily permit access to such persons.

There were allegations that the government falsely charged peaceful dissidents with violence, including former presidential candidate Maurice Kamto. In a statement signed in March, Kamto and four of his supporters, including campaign manager Paul Eric Kingue, Albert Zongang of the La Dynamique political party, Penda Ekoka of the Mouvement Agir, and popular singer Gaston Philip Abbe, popularly known as Valsero, all of whom were detained at the Kondengui prison, claimed they were political prisoners, along with their 160 supporters in other prisons throughout the country.

On October 3, President Biya announced the pardoning of 333 lower-level Anglophone detainees, and on October 5, the Military Tribunal ordered the release of Kamto and hundreds of his associates.

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 detention despite a June 2016 decision of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention describing Marafa's detention "a violation of international laws." The government did not respond to repeated requests for members of the diplomatic community to meet with Marafa.

Politically Motivated Reprisal Against Individuals Located Outside the Country

There were credible reports that for politically motivated purposes the government attempted to exert bilateral pressure on other countries aimed at having them take adverse legal action against specific individuals, including Anglophones separatists and other political opponents.

On August 20, the Yaounde military court sentenced Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe and nine other Anglophone leaders to life imprisonment and a fine of 250 billion CFA francs (\$425 million) in the early morning hours without their lawyers present. In January 2018 Nigerian special forces had arrested Sisiku and 46 other Anglophone separatists in a hotel in Abuja, Nigeria, and forcibly repatriated them to Cameroon, in spite of the fact that some had applied for asylum. From the time of their transfer to Cameroon, the group had been held in pretrial detention.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens and organizations have the right to seek civil remedies for human rights violations 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 compelling. There were reports that entities associated with the government had failed to comply with civil court decisions pertaining to labor matters.

Property Restitution

The government continued to compensate relocated families in connection with infrastructure projects, including the Kribi Sea Port and the Yaounde-Douala highway projects. In 2014 the government initiated a judicial procedure against officials suspected of having misappropriated money earmarked for compensations. On February 26, the newspaper *Cameroon Tribune* reported that the Special Criminal Court arrested the mayor of Lobo in Lekie division, Center Region, and 13 others under suspicion of embezzling funds from the Yaounde-Douala highway construction project. There were no reported developments on the cases of previously arrested officials.

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 for 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 whenever they wished.

An administrative authority, including a governor or senior divisional officer, may authorize police to conduct neighborhood sweeps without warrants, and this practice occurred, especially in the restive Southwest and Northwest Regions.

g. Abuses in Internal Conflict

Killings: There were credible reports that members of government forces deliberately killed innocent citizens. On January 21, for example, according to credible organizations, members of government security forces removed a young man from his bike at Squares Kumbo, Northwest Region, and killed

him. The victim reportedly had just dropped off a passenger when security forces laid hands on him. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), a video circulated on social media showing the military harassing a group of men, reportedly from Kurt-Nwa, Northwest Region. These men were reportedly found dead after the incident.

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA intensified deadly attacks on civilians and members of security forces in the Far North Region. On July 22, in Amchide, Boko Haram fighters killed a man in his residence because they believed he had notified the army of their presence. On July 28, individuals believed to be Boko Haram operatives killed three vigilance committee members in Double, Far North Region. On August 1, assailants believed to be Boko Haram fighters attacked the border village of Guederou in the Mayo Sava Division and killed four persons, including three brothers ages 11 to 16. On September 14, six security force members were killed and nine others were wounded during a Boko Haram attack on the Multilateral Force Post in Souarem, Far North Region.

Abductions: As in the previous year, armed separatists carried out abductions in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions and held noncombatants as hostages, including public officials, political leaders, teachers, schoolchildren, and traditional leaders. There were credible allegations that separatists physically abused abduction victims, including forcing them to sit in excrement, putting them in stress positions, beating them, and flogging them with the flat edges of machetes. In most cases, the abductors subsequently freed the victims, after either negotiations or payment of ransoms.

A June 30 situation report by OCHA indicated that kidnapping rates increased in June. On June 7, gunmen kidnapped the owner of a travel agency in Bamenda, Northwest Region, before releasing him hours later. On November 5, armed Anglophone separatists stormed a Presbyterian school in Bamenda, Northwest Region. The head of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and the Council of the Protestant Churches of Cameroon reported 79 children and three adults were kidnapped, adding that 11 students had also been kidnapped on October 31. In November Anglophone separatists kidnapped three Franciscan sisters and 13 novices who were traveling in the Northwest Region.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: There were credible reports that members of government forces physically abused civilians and prisoners in their custody, including those detained in the conflicts in the Far North and Southwest and Northwest Regions, especially after the July 22-23 riot at the Yaounde and Buea prisons.

Child Soldiers: The government did not directly recruit or use child soldiers, but vigilance committees may have employed children. Some community neighborhood watch groups, known as vigilance committees, may have used and recruited children as young as 12 in operations against Boko Haram. Boko Haram continued to use child soldiers, including girls, in its attacks on civilian and military targets. There were also some reports that Anglophone separatist armed groups in the Southwest and Northwest Regions used children.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: There were reports of repeated attacks on health workers and institutions and the use of firearms around health facilities by both members of security forces and Anglophone separatists. On February 13, security forces reportedly attacked the Bangolan Baptist Health Center using heavy weapons, destroyed property, and took valuable items belonging to the institution and its personnel.

On September 3, according to online media platform *Cameroon Info*, armed men believed to be Anglophone separatists attacked the Bonakanda community radio in Buea, Southwest Region. The assailants abducted Mary Namondo, a journalist working with the station. Namondo was released on September 5.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, but the government often restricted this right, explicitly or implicitly.

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. Many civil society and political organizations reported increased difficulty when obtaining approval to organize public gatherings.

In the early hours of February 23, police surrounded CRM headquarters in the Odza neighborhood of Yaounde and the New-Deido in Douala to prevent prospective activists from registering with the party. In other cities, such as Bafoussam and Mbouda in the West Region, security forces disrupted the registration process and arrested CRM activists. In Bafoussam, police seized CRM's campaign truck and detained it along with its driver. On April 30, Zacheus Bakoma, the divisional officer for Douala 5, ordered a 90-day provisional closure of the Mteki community hall after the CRM used the hall as a venue for a meeting on April 28.

Press and Media, including Online Media: Independent media were active and expressed diverse views. This landscape, however, included restrictions on editorial independence, in part due to stated security concerns related to the fight against Boko Haram, the Anglophone crisis, and the postelectoral crisis. Journalists reported practicing self-censorship to avoid repercussions for criticizing the government, especially on security matters. According to the 2018 Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders, the re-election of President Biya for a seventh term of office was accompanied by multiple instances of intimidation, attacks, and arrests of journalists.

Violence and Harassment: Police, gendarmes, and other government agents arrested, detained, physically attacked, and intimidated journalists for their reporting. Journalists were arrested in connection with their reporting on the Anglophone crisis. According to reports by multiple organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), police arrested Pidgin news anchor Samuel Wazizi, who worked for the Buea-based independent station Chillen Muzik and Television. The arrest occurred on August 2 in Buea, Southwest Region. Police initially held Wazizi at the Buea police station and subsequently handed him over to the military, who detained him on August 7 without access to his lawyer or family. As of late November, he was presumed to still be in detention.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Under a 1990 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 (NCC) had suspended them previously. In February the NCC issued a press release calling on journalists to be professional in their publications. The release was in reaction to media coverage following the

January 26 protests called for by CRM, the arrests of hundreds of activists, including Maurice Kamto, and the ransacking of the Cameroonian embassy in Paris by anti-President Biya protesters. The NCC chairman indicated that the government had informed all professional media about the facts through official procedures and regretted that some press organizations continued to spread opinion contrary to government’s position, thereby maintaining confusion.

At its 23rd ordinary session, the NCC issued warning notices in 21 media regulation cases. The charges stated that the groups engaged in practices contrary to professional ethics, social cohesion, and national integration.

In a July 20 meeting with 100 private media outlet managers, Minister of Communications Rene Sadi chided Cameroon’s private media for abandoning its duty to “inform, educate, and entertain” by publishing articles that “sowed divisiveness and promoted tribalism.” He accused the private press of “playing politics under the influence of journalistic cover.” As of year’s end, no private television or radio station held a valid broadcasting license. Although the few that could afford the licensing fee made good-faith efforts to obtain accreditation, the ministry had not issued or renewed licenses since 2007. The high financial barriers coupled with bureaucratic hurdles rendered Cameroonian private media’s very existence illegal.

Libel/Slander Laws: Press freedom is constrained by libel laws that authorize 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 heavy fines.

National Security: Authorities cited laws against terrorism or protecting national security to arrest or punish critics of the government. During a security meeting in Douala on August 9, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji called on the representatives of NGOs and media professionals to be responsible, contribute their own quota to nation building, and avoid derogatory language that discredits government actions. Atanga Nji said many media houses in Douala organized weekly debates in order to sabotage government actions and promote secessionist tendencies. He urged private media organizations to exercise responsibility when carrying out their activities, warning them to construct, not destroy, the nation. He called on opposition political parties to respect the law and not to force his hand to suspend them. The minister also warned NGOs to respect the contract they signed with his ministry or be suspended.

Nongovernmental Impact: There were reports that separatist groups in the Southwest and Northwest Regions sought to inhibit freedom of expression, including for the press. In an August 13 online post, Moki Edwin Kindzeka, a Yaounde-based journalist, said it was becoming impossible for journalists to practice their profession, because they faced pressure from both separatist fighters and the government. The article was in reaction to Atanga Nji’s August 9 statements.

Internet Freedom

No credible reports indicated that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. The government occasionally disrupted access to the internet.

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 their teaching on politically sensitive topics, and administrative officials often deterred teachers from criticizing the government.

On March 5, Jean-Pierre Voundi Abondo, the principal of Yaounde’s Government Bilingual High School Mendong, suspended Felix Ningue from his duties as a philosophy teacher. Ningue reportedly proposed an abstract from Maurice Kamto’s 1993 book entitled *L’Urgence de la Pensee (The Urgency of Thought)*, as one of the topics for student discussion in an examination on February 17. In an interview on Canal 2 television channel, Voundi said the school was apolitical and that he asked Ningue to stop teaching pending an investigation.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government limited and restricted freedoms of peaceful 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 of 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 refused to grant permits for gatherings and used force to suppress assemblies for which it had not issued permits. Authorities typically cited security concerns as the basis for deciding to block assemblies.

On January 26, in Yaounde, Douala, Bafoussam, and other cities across the country, police arrested several dozen CRM activists who participated in a rally to denounce electoral irregularities in the October 2018 presidential election, the ongoing crisis in the two Anglophone regions, and poor management of infrastructure projects associated with the 2019 African Cup of Nations. The CRM notified authorities in advance of the protests but did not receive authorization. Security forces, in response, used excessive force against demonstrators. According to Amnesty International, more than one hundred protesters were arrested in Douala, Yaounde, Dschang, Bafoussam, and Bafang. Approximately 50 were released the following day, and the remainder were transferred to Yaounde and placed under administrative custody. Seven persons were shot and injured in the city of Douala, including lawyer Michele Ndoki, while other protesters were beaten. Communication Minister Rene Emmanuel Sadi denied the use of live ammunition against protesters, but social media contradicted that account with videos of gunfire in Douala and a member of the riot police firing a rubber bullet at close range into the leg of a peaceful protester.

On April 5, Minister of Territorial Administration Atanga Nji issued a press release prohibiting all meetings or public events by the CRM. Days later, on April 13, the party initiated a series of meetings throughout the country to demand the immediate release of Maurice Kamto, who by that time had been imprisoned for more than two months. The CRM also aimed to denounce “the selective modification of the electoral code” and the mismanagement of the funds dedicated to infrastructure projects associated with the 2019 African Cup of Nations, which was to be hosted by Cameroon before being ultimately awarded to Egypt. The CRM unsuccessfully appealed the ministry’s 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 prefect, 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 heavy 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, or associations were complicated, involved long delays, and were unevenly enforced. This resulted in associations operating in legal uncertainty, their activities tolerated but not formally approved.

During the year the government did not ban any organizations. The Ministry of Territorial Administration, however, regularly used threats of suspension on the heads of political parties and NGOs. At a press conference after the January 26 CRM protests, Minister Atanga Nji indicated that the ministry had the right to take certain precautionary measures, meaning the CRM's suspension. A number of observers stated that political motivations were evident in the government's selective application of the law.

c. Freedom of Religion

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

d. Freedom of Movement

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, at times the government restricted these rights. Growing concerns over the entry of armed groups into Cameroon from the Central African Republic (CAR) and the conflict with Boko Haram in the Far North Region appeared to have prompted the government to adopt a more restrictive approach to refugee movement. The government made it more difficult for refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons to move freely in the country.

In some instances, the government worked with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern. The government sometimes failed to respect its obligations under relevant international laws. There were instances where it forcibly returned asylum seekers to their countries and did not readily provide humanitarian organizations such as the United Nations access to asylum seekers before refouling them.

In-country Movement: Using minor infractions as a pretext, police and gendarmes at roadblocks and checkpoints in cities and on most highways often extorted bribes and harassed travelers. Police frequently stopped travelers to check identification documents, vehicle registrations, and tax receipts as security and immigration control measures. 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 Anglophone separatists also restricted the movements of persons and goods in the two Anglophone regions, sometimes in a deliberate attempt to harass and intimidate the local population. Humanitarian organizations cited difficulty in accessing certain areas and in some instances were harassed and denied passage by government authorities.

On June 14, Governor Adolphe Lele Lafrique of the Northwest Region lifted the curfew placed in the region since November 2018. The curfew, which lasted eight months, restricted movement of persons and property in the Northwest Region between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.

e. Internally Displaced Persons

Evolving civil unrest and violence in Northwest and Southwest Regions continued to spur population displacement. According to OCHA, an estimated 710,000 individuals were displaced in Littoral, Northwest, Southwest, and West Regions. In addition, UNHCR estimated that more than 44,000 Cameroonian refugees were in southeastern Nigeria. An August 26 announcement by an armed separatist group on social media imposed a restriction of movement on all persons and closure of businesses starting September 2 for three weeks. This led to a further exodus of persons from the Northwest and Southwest Regions. Even prior to the announcement, relief agencies estimated that more than 2,800 persons fled the two regions to seek refuge in the Littoral and West, and an additional 879 individuals crossed the border into Nigeria between August 1 and 20.

As of September 30, the displaced population in the Far North Region was 488,418, including 271,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), 106,418 refugees, and 111,000 returnees, in part driven from their homes by attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, according to estimates by the International Organization for Migration and UNHCR.

The government did not put in place mechanisms to promote the safe, voluntary return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs in the Far North Region. Provision of basic social services to IDPs and assistance to returnees have been carried out by relief actors with minimal support from the government. In the Northwest and Southwest Regions, the government did not manage any efforts to ensure unhindered access for humanitarian actors to deliver aid to persons in need. Its actions were focused on blocking the delivery of aid to show that there is no humanitarian crisis in these regions. Although it made some effort to provide urgently needed in-kind assistance to crisis affected IDPs in the Northwest and Southwest based on its Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan, this assistance was distributed to populations without an assessment of their needs and only to persons in accessible areas, especially in regional capital cities.

f. Protection of Refugees

According to UNHCR and government estimates, the country hosted 403,208 refugees and 9,435 asylum seekers as of September 30. The refugee population included 291,803 CAR nationals, 108,335 Nigerians, and 1,599 Chadians. The remaining refugee population hailed from Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi, and the Republic of Congo.

In principle, Cameroon operates an open-door policy and has ratified the major legal instruments for refugee protection, including the 1951 Refugee Convention. These commitments were not translated into a progressive legal framework allowing refugees their rights as stated in various legal instruments.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: The government cited other concerns, including security and suspicion of criminal activity, to justify arbitrary arrests and detention of refugees and asylum seekers. The government at times cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to IDPs, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

Refoulement: The government stated there was no official policy of forcibly repatriating refugees. On January 16, however, Cameroon forcefully returned 267 Nigerian refugees fleeing Boko Haram to northeast Nigeria. In a February 27 statement, Medecins Sans Frontieres stated Cameroonian and Nigerian authorities ordered 40,000 refugees in Cameroon to return to northeast Nigeria and expressed concern over their possible fate due to continuing insecurity in Rann and a lack of humanitarian assistance. Tens of thousands of persons had fled the town of Rann in northeast Nigeria to Cameroon after a January attack by Islamist insurgents. In 2018 UNHCR and NGOs also reported cases of forced returns of asylum seekers, mostly of Nigerians. According to HRW, in 2017 more than 4,400 asylum-seeking Nigerians were forcibly returned to Nigeria. UNHCR reported that 1,300 were forcibly returned in 2018 and an estimated 600 in 2019. In February an estimated 40,000 Nigerian refugees who had fled to Cameroon in the wake of armed attacks were soon after returned to Nigeria, after Nigerian government officials advised that conditions were safe for their return. Humanitarian organizations, however, stated the conditions were unsafe for return and that the area was largely inaccessible to relief agencies.

Access to Asylum: The laws provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system of providing protection to refugees, but the implementation of this system is less likely. UNHCR continued to provide documentation and assistance to the refugee population. Nevertheless, local authorities did not always recognize these 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 of those not living in a refugee camp.

Access to Basic Services: Refugees had limited access to health care, education, and employment opportunities. Their rural host communities faced similar challenges, 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 support through humanitarian assistance, while refugees living in host communities faced difficulty receiving services.

Durable Solutions: UNHCR and the governments of Cameroon and Nigeria started the voluntary repatriation of Nigerian refugees in Cameroon as agreed upon under the 2017 tripartite agreement. The first phase of the voluntary repatriation exercise was conducted on August 22, and involved 133 Nigerian refugees, who departed Maroua for Yola in Nigeria’s Adamawa State, using a Nigerian Air Force plane.

In June 2018 UNHCR carried out return intention surveys using a sample of 4,000 CAR refugees that indicated that approximately one quarter of those surveyed would be interested in going back home, while three quarters would prefer local integration as a durable solution. As of year’s end, UNHCR had assisted more than 2,000 CAR refugees who elected to voluntary return to their areas of origin.

Temporary Protection: The government provided temporary, unofficial protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees, extending this protection to hundreds of individuals during the year, 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.

g. Stateless Persons

Not applicable.

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 and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In March 2018 the country held its second senate elections. The ruling CPDM won 63 of the 70 elected seats, while the opposition Social Democratic Front won seven elected seats. The president, in accordance with the constitution, appointed an additional 30 senators, including 24 from CPDM, two from National Union for Democracy and Progress, and one each from four other nominal opposition parties, including Union of the People of Cameroon, National Alliance for Democracy and Progress, Movement for the Defense of the Republic, and Cameroon National Salvation Front. The election was largely peaceful.

In October 2018 the country conducted a presidential election, against the backdrop of protracted sociopolitical unrest in the two Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions and insecurity in the Far North Region due to attacks by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA. Eight candidates took part in the elections; a ninth dropped out just before election day to support a rival opposition candidate. The election was marred by irregularities, including intimidation of voters and representatives of candidates at polling sites, late posting of polling sites and voter lists, ballot stuffing, voters with multiple registration, and a lack of transparency in the vote tallying process. In its preliminary statement, the African Union election observation mission noted that the security environment resulted in the curtailment of civil and political liberties in certain regions and negatively impacted the level of participation of citizens in the electoral process.

New legislative and municipal elections were expected during the year, but in July the government extended the term of office of members of the National Assembly by two months, effective October 29. On July 15, the president signed a decree extending the term of office of municipal councilors until February 29, 2020. By law regional elections must be held by the end of February 2020.

Political Parties and Political Participation: As of September 2018, the country had 305 registered political parties. The CPDM remained dominant throughout every level of state institution. This was due to restrictions on opposition political parties, including gerrymandering, unbalanced media coverage, use of government resources for CPDM campaigning, interference with the right of opposition parties to organize during electoral campaigns, and influence of traditional rulers, who were largely coopted by the majority party. Additionally, membership in the ruling political party conferred significant advantages, including in the allocation of key jobs in state-owned entities and the civil service.

Human rights organizations and opposition political actors considered the drawing of voter districts and distribution of parliamentary or municipal councilors' seats unfair, stating 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 in both senate and presidential elections to the detriment of the other candidates. Traditional rulers, who receive salaries from the government, openly declared their support for President Biya prior to the presidential election, and some reportedly compelled residents of their constituencies to prove that they did not vote for an opposition candidate by presenting unused ballots.

In March Cabral Libii submitted the documentation for the legalization of his political party, Les Citoyens. Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji refused to legalize the party, and Cabral instead joined the Cameroonian Party for National Reconciliation.

After President Biya announced legislative and municipal elections would be held on February 9, 2020, Kamto's Cameroon Renaissance Movement party reported persistent interference from local government officials as party leaders sought the necessary documents to file candidate lists. Reports included local officials refusing to come to work during the registration period, judges requiring traditional rulers to confirm residency, and local officials refusing to certify birth certificates for CRM candidates. On November 25, as a result of this interference, CRM announced its decision to boycott the elections.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities in the political process; however, due to cultural factors, women remained underrepresented at all levels of government. Women occupied 26 of 374 council mayor positions, 81 of 280 parliamentary seats, and 11 of 66 cabinet positions. Similar disparities existed in other senior level offices, including territorial command and security and defense positions. With the voting age set at 20, youths older than 18 and younger than 20 are not allowed to vote. The minority Baka, a nomadic Pygmy people, were not represented in the senate, national assembly, or higher offices of government.

During the year Minister of Territorial Administration Atanga Nji maintained his refusal to recognize Edith Kah Walla, who was elected in 2011 as leader of the Cameroon People's Party (CPP), as the legitimate leader of the party. Atanga Nji continued to maintain his stance that Samuel Tita Fon, who created the party in 1991 but became a supporter of the ruling party, remained the CPP leader.

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. The penal code identifies different offenses as corruption, including influence peddling, involvement in a prohibited employment, and nondeclaration of conflict of interest. Reporting of corruption was encouraged through exempting whistleblowers from criminal proceedings. Corruption in official examinations is punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment, fines up to two million CFA francs (\$3,400), or both. There were reports that senior officials sentenced to prison were not required to forfeit ill-gotten gains.

In 2018 the National Anticorruption Commission instituted a toll-free number to encourage citizens to denounce acts of corruption of which they were victims or witnesses. In addition, there were a number of organizations who joined a common platform known as the National Platform of Cameroonian Civil Society Organizations, which under the 2018 Finance Law was provided a budget of 150 million CFA francs (\$255,000).

Corruption: The results of the 2019 competitive examination into the National School of Administration and Magistracy highlighted unethical practices surrounding the organization of public service examinations. Anecdotal reports suggested most successful candidates either hailed from specific localities or were sponsored by or related to senior-level government officials, to the detriment of ordinary candidates.

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 and issued verdicts on some pending cases. On March 8, the court placed former defense minister Edgar Alain Mebe Ngo’o and his wife in pretrial detention at the Yaounde Kondengui Central Prison. Authorities accused them of financial malpractices associated with the purchase of military equipment for the army, from the time Mebe Ngo’o served as minister of defense.

Financial Disclosure: The constitution requires senior government officials, including members of the cabinet, to declare their assets prior to and after leaving office, but the government had not implemented it since its promulgation in 1996.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding 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 impeded the effectiveness of many local human rights NGOs by harassing their members, limiting access to prisoners, refusing to share information, and threatening violence against NGO personnel. Human rights defenders and activists received anonymous threats by telephone, text message, and email. The government took no action to investigate or prevent such occurrences. The government at times denied international organization access to the country. The government criticized reports from international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, HRW, and the International Crisis Group, accusing them of publishing baseless accusations. On April 12, for example, officials at Douala International Airport refused entry to an HRW researcher, even though she held a valid visa.

There were several reports of intimidation, threats, and attacks aimed at human rights activists including members of the REDHAC and the Network of Cameroonian Lawyers against the Death Penalty, among others. A female human rights advocate was sexually assaulted by an armed man who warned her to stop harassing the government.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: In May UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet visited Cameroon, at the invitation of the Cameroonian government, to evaluate progress made in the protection and promotion of human rights. Bachelet expressed concern to the government over the shrinking of civic space in Cameroon.

Government Human Rights Bodies: In June the government passed a law establishing the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC), as a replacement for the existing NCHRF. Like the NCHRF, the CHRC is a nominally independent but government-funded institution. The law establishing the CHRC extended its missions to protect human rights, incorporating provisions of Articles 2 and 3 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The CHRC did not become operational during the year, because the president had not yet designated its members. The NCHRF continued to operate in its place. It coordinated actions with NGOs, visited some prisons and detention sites, and provided human rights education. NGOs, civil society, and the general population considered the NCHRF dedicated and effective, albeit inadequately resourced and with insufficient ability to effectively hold human rights violators to account. A number of observers questioned the decision to establish a new institution and expressed concerns about its ability to confront the government that funds it.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

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 victims often did not report them. The law does not address spousal rape. In a report on the Northwest and Southwest Regions, OCHA revealed that it had recorded 74 cases of rape as of July 21, with only 13 victims being able to obtain health-care services due to the absence of services in their localities.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, although assault is prohibited and punishable by imprisonment and fines. OCHA recorded 785 cases of gender-based violence in July.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law protects the bodily integrity of persons, and the 2016 penal code prohibits genital mutilation. Perpetrators are subject to a prison sentence of from 10 to 20 years, or imprisonment for life if the offender habitually carries out this practice for commercial purposes or the practice causes death. FGM/C remained a problem, but its prevalence was low. As in the previous year, children were reportedly subjected to FGM/C in isolated areas of the Far North, East, and Southwest Regions and among the Choa and Ejagham ethnic groups.

In 2018 the minister of women's empowerment and the family said the government fully adopted a UN General Assembly resolution on the intensification of the global action aimed at eliminating FGM/C and had been carrying out initiatives to end FGM/C for more than 10 years. These initiatives included

granting support for male and female excision practitioners to change professions and creating local committees to fight against the phenomenon in areas of high prevalence, such as the Southwest and North Regions.

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 husband, including the marital home. To protect women better, including widows, the government included provisions in the 2016 penal code 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 forgo certain activities such as bathing or freedom of movement, 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 can be imprisoned for periods of six months to one year and may be fined between 100,000 and one million CFA francs (\$170 and \$1,700). If the victim is a minor, the penalty can be one to three years in prison. If the offender is the victim’s teacher, the penalty can increase to three to five years in prison. Despite these legal provisions, sexual harassment was widespread, and there were no reports that anyone was fined or imprisoned for sexual harassment. This was partially due to sexual harassment victims’ reluctance to file official complaints.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: The constitution provides for the same legal status and rights for women and men. In practice, women did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. Although local government officials including mayors 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. Although women and men have equal employment rights, fewer women occupied positions of responsibility.

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship through their parents, but not through birth in the country’s territory, and the responsibility to register birth falls upon parents. Many births went unregistered because children were not always born in health facilities, and many parents faced challenges in reaching local government offices. According to a recent study by the National Civil Status Bureau (BUNEC), nearly 43,000 final-year primary school children in the Far North Region risked missing their examinations because they did not have birth certificates. In all, 400,000 primary school children in the Far North Region were without birth certificates. In 2018, 18,000 pupils in the Far North Region missed their academic examinations for lack of birth certificates. A three-year pilot project by BUNEC in Betare-Oya Subdivision in Lom and Djerem Division of the East Region and Mokolo Subdivision, Mayo-Tsanaga Division of the Far North Region suggested that close to 1,000,000 children in the country could be without birth certificates.

Education: The law provides for tuition-free compulsory primary education but does not set an age limit. The law punishes any parent with sufficient means who refuses to send his or her child to school with a fine between 50,000 and 500,000 CFA francs (\$85 and \$850). The punishment is imprisonment from one

to two years in cases in which the offense is repeated. Children were generally expected to complete primary education at 12. Secondary school students have to pay tuition and other fees in addition to buying uniforms and books. This rendered secondary education unaffordable for many children.

During the year separatist attacks on the schools in the Anglophone Southwest and Northwest Regions continued to disrupt the normal operation of schools. In its July report on the Southwest and Northwest crisis, OCHA indicated that more than 700,000 children—representing almost nine of every 10 children—had been out of school for nearly three years and that 80 percent of schools remained closed in the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

In May Catholic authorities agreed to close St. Bede’s College in Kom, Northwest Region, after the school principal was kidnapped, allegedly for not respecting the separatists’ call for a school boycott. The Presbyterian Church also agreed to close all its schools in the two Anglophone regions after armed separatists kidnapped more than 90 children in two separate incidents in October and November.

Dozens of schools remained closed in the Far North Region due to attacks from Boko Haram and ISIS-WA.

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. Penalties for the offenses range from 10,000 CFA francs (\$17) for forced labor to imprisonment for life in the case of assault leading to death or serious harm. 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.

Early and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage is 18. Despite the law, according to UNICEF’s March 2018 child marriage data, 31 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before they turned 18, and of these, 10 percent were married before they turned 15. Childhood marriages were more prevalent in the northern part of the country. The law punishes anyone who compels an individual into marriage with imprisonment of from five to 10 years, and with fines between 25,000 and one million CFA francs (\$43 and \$1,700).

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits commercial sexual exploitation, sale, offering or procuring for prostitution, and practices related to child pornography. A conviction requires proof of a threat, fraud, deception, force, or other forms of coercion. Penalties include imprisonment of between 10 and 20 years and a fine of between 100,000 and 10 million CFA francs (\$170 and \$17,000). The law does not specifically provide a minimum age for consensual sex. According to anecdotal reports, children younger than 18 were exploited in commercial sex, especially by restaurant and bar promoters, although no statistics were available. Anecdotal reports suggested the ongoing crisis in the two Anglophone regions had contributed to a dramatic increase in the prostitution of underage girls and number of early pregnancies, especially in areas with IDPs.

Infanticide or Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: There were no reports of infanticide of children with disabilities. The newspaper *L’Oeil du Sahel* reported that on July 1 local residents found the lifeless body of a child of an estimated age of seven months abandoned in a garbage bin in the neighborhood of Pitoare in Maroua, Far North Region.

Displaced Children: Many displaced children continued to live on the streets of urban centers, although the trend was in decline as a result of stringent security measures and the amended penal code that criminalizes vagrancy. According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration, there were approximately 2,570 unaccompanied children in the Far North Region as of April, including IDPs, returnees, out-of-camp refugees, and other migrants (see also sections 1.e. and 1.f.). These children faced many challenges, including limited access to school, health, and protection. As in 2018, thousands of children were negatively impacted by the humanitarian crisis in the Northwest and Southwest. These children faced significant abuses of their rights by armed forces and nonstate armed actors alike. The government had not established structures to ensure that internally displaced children were protected from recruitment by nonstate armed groups and terrorist organizations. The government, through the Ministry of Social Affairs and in joint action with the International Organization for Migration, in September provided temporary shelter to unaccompanied children who were rescued from a boat off the coast of Cameroon in Kribi.

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> (<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>).

Anti-Semitism

The Jewish community was very small, and there were no known reports of anti-Semitic acts. A government minister made comments on a prime-time television program that were widely considered anti-Semitic. Speaking on Cameroon Radio Television in early February, Justice Minister Delegate Jean De Dieu Momo warned opposition leader Maurice Kamto that he was leading the Bamileke people to a fate similar to that of the Jews under Hitler in World War II. He said, “educated people like Maurice Kamto need to know where they are leading their people.” The government of Cameroon distanced itself from his comments, saying he was speaking on a strictly personal basis.

Trafficking in Persons

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

Persons with Disabilities

The constitution protects the rights of all persons, including persons with disabilities. 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. 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.

There were no reports of police or other government officials inciting, perpetrating, or condoning violence against persons with disabilities during the reporting period. The majority of children with disabilities attended school with nondisabled peers. 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 specialized 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. In an early August report, HRW remarked that persons with disabilities were among the most marginalized and at-risk population in any crisis-affected country, and that Cameroon was no exception. Persons with disabilities in the Northwest and Southwest Regions continued to face attack and abuse by belligerents, often because they were unable to flee. HRW claimed that between January and May, it interviewed 48 persons with disabilities living in the Anglophone regions, their families, representatives of UN agencies, and national and international humanitarian organizations to investigate how the crisis in the two regions had disproportionately affected persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The population consists of more than 275 ethnic groups. Members of the president’s Beti/Bulu ethnic group from the South Region continued to hold many key positions and were disproportionately represented in the government, state-owned businesses, and security forces.

Indigenous People

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 peoples’ 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. Most Baka did not have these documents, and efforts to reach them were impeded by the difficulty in accessing their 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 subjected to harassment, sometimes with the complicity of administrative or judicial authorities.

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

Consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults is illegal and punishable by a prison sentence lasting between six months and five years and a fine ranging from 20,000 to 200,000 CFA francs (\$34 to \$340).

LGBTI rights organizations such as the Cameroonian Foundation for AIDS (CAMFAIDS), Humanity First Cameroon, Alternatives Cameroon, National Observatory of the Rights of LGBTI Persons and Their Defenders, and others continued to report arbitrary arrests of LGBTI persons, but they had become less

frequent in the past year. While formal arrests may be diminishing, LGBTI individuals continued to receive anonymous threats by telephone, text message, and email. Authorities did not generally investigate these allegations. Civil society members stated there were also cases where LGBTI individuals were subjected to so-called corrective rape, sometimes with the complicity of the victim’s family. Police were generally unresponsive to requests to increase protection for lawyers who received threats because they represented LGBTI persons. Both police and civilians reportedly continued to extort money from presumed LGBTI individuals by threatening to expose them.

The constitution provides for equal rights for all citizens, but the law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination against LGBTI persons in housing, employment, nationality laws, and access to government services such as health care. Security forces sometimes harassed persons on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including individuals found with condoms and lubricants. Fear of exposure affected individuals’ willingness to access HIV/AIDS services, and a number of HIV-positive men who had sex with men took female partners to conceal their activities. Anecdotal reports suggested some discrimination occurred in places of employment with respect to sexual orientation. On September 3, members of Affirmative Action, an LGBTI rights group, remarked that transgender persons often avoided seeking formal employment due to discrimination.

In 2018 the National Observatory for the Rights of LGBTI persons and their Defenders, an umbrella organization representing 33 individual LGBTI organizations who were members of the Unity Platform, produced a report documenting 376 cases of abuses perpetrated against LGBTI persons in 2018. As of August CAMFAIDS alone had documented 206 human rights abuses. The abuses were of a physical, psychological, economic, verbal, cultural, or religious nature.

On September 4, CAMFAIDS reported that members of an army security unit arrested six persons without a warrant at a snack bar in the Yaounde neighborhood of Emombo and detained them at gendarmerie headquarters on September 1. CAMFAIDS claimed the six persons were being detained on charges of homosexuality and indecency. Earlier in April, according to CAMFAIDS, members of security forces arrested 25 persons at the same location. They asked the victims to undress and photographed them while they were naked.

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

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Persons with HIV often suffered social discrimination and were isolated from their families and society due to social stigma and 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.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Several cases of vigilante action and arson attacks were reported during the year, involving destruction of both public and private property. On June 3, members of the Mbororo community killed two persons and burned homes in Wum, Northwest Region, allegedly in retaliation against repeated attacks by Anglophone separatists.

Vigilante and mob justice were a concern. The privately owned newspaper *Le Messager* announced that police on July 20 deposited the burned bodies of two young men at the mortuary of the Douala Bonassama district hospital. A crowd reportedly attacked the boys at a place called Total Nouvelle Route Bonaberi at approximately 10 a.m. the same day, beat them to death, and burned their corpses. The victims were on a motorcycle equipped with a global positioning system (GPS). They allegedly killed the motorbike owner earlier in the Douala Akwa neighborhood before stealing the bike. A relative of the deceased located the engine using the GPS and alerted the crowd. Police reportedly arrested three persons suspected of having organized the mob justice and placed them in custody at the Douala Mobile Response Group number 2.

The privately owned newspaper *The Guardian Post* reported that during the night of August 1, a man, approximately 24 years of age, died as a result of mob vigilante violence in the Yaounde Etoug-Ebe neighborhood for allegedly stealing food from a local shop. Roseline, the lady whose items were stolen, reportedly told a journalist that, during her return to her shop at approximately 3 a.m., she saw the man carrying a bunch of plantains and a basket of tomatoes from her shop. She alerted her neighbors who reacted promptly, caught the thief, and assaulted him while she watched. Police reportedly came to the scene in the morning and took the corpse to the Yaounde University Teaching Hospital.

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 legal strikes. This does not apply to multiple 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 by-laws. Founding members must also have clean police records. Those who form a union and carry out union activities without registration can be fined under the law. 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 responsible for “supervising public freedoms,” currently the minister of territorial administration.

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 the majority of the workforce.

Legal strikes or lockouts may be called only after conciliation and arbitration procedures have been exhausted. Workers who ignore procedures to conduct a legal strike may be dismissed or fined. Free Industrial Zones are subject to some labor laws; however, 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.

The government and employers did not effectively enforce the applicable legislation on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Penalties for violations were rarely enforced and were ineffective as a deterrent. Administrative judicial procedures were infrequent and subject to lengthy delays and appeals.

Collective agreements are binding until after a party has given three months’ notice to terminate. Unlike 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. The government continued to undermine the leadership of the Cameroon Workers Trade Union Confederation (CSTC), one of 12 trade union confederations elected in 2015.

Despite multiple complaints by CSTC’s elected leadership, the government continued to work with former leaders. In June for example, the minister of labor reportedly included Celestin Bama, a member of the former leadership team, as CSTC’s representative in the Cameroonian delegation to the International Labor Conference in Geneva. The International Trade Union Confederation worked with CSTC’s legitimate leadership for its 4th Congress held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in early December 2018.

Trade unionists reported some company officials disregarded labor legislation and prohibited the establishment of trade unions in their companies. They cited the examples of Sarsel and Harjap, two Lebanese-owned businesses based in Douala, as well as several small- and medium-sized Cameroonian companies. Unlike in 2018, there were no reported allegations that some companies retained 1 percent of unionized workers’ salaries as union dues but refused to transfer the money to trade unions.

Many employers used subcontractors to avoid hiring workers with bargaining rights. Workers’ representatives said most major companies, including parastatal companies, engaged in the practice, citing the electricity company Energy of Cameroon, the water company Camerounaise des Eaux, cement manufacturer Cimencam, Guinness, Aluminum Smelter (Alucam), COTCO, Ecobank, and many others. Subcontracting was reported to involve all categories of personnel, from the lowest to senior levels. As a result, workers with equal expertise and experience did not always enjoy similar advantages when working for the same business, and subcontracted personnel typically lacked a legal basis to file complaints.

Several strikes were announced during the year. Some were called off after successful negotiation, and some were carried out peacefully, while others faced some degree of repression.

On July 31, the Free National Union of Dockers and Related Activities of Cameroon embarked on a peaceful and lawful strike at the port of Douala. The striking workers demanded improved working conditions, including the effective implementation of a presidential decree of January 24 that offered them hope for better conditions of employment and work. Port officials allegedly called police and administrative authorities to the scene shortly after the start of the strike. They threatened the striking workers with dismissal if they did not return to work and arrested Jean Pierre Voundi Ebale, the elected

leader of the dockers’ union, and two other members of the union, Guialbert Oumenguele and Elton Djoukang Nkongo. The senior divisional officer for Wouri placed them on a renewable two-week administrative custody at the Douala Central Prison. Voundi Ebale and his codetainees were released on September 1, after one full month of detention, reportedly on banditry-related charges.

As of November 30, the government delegate to the Douala City Council had not implemented a September 2017 decision of the Littoral Court of Appeal’s Labor Arbitration Council requesting the delegate to reinstate the 11 workers’ representatives he suspended in April 2017. The delegate instead opposed the court decision and referred the issue back to the labor inspector, who once again referred it to the region’s Court of Appeal. After multiple postponements, the court on October 29 confirmed the initial decision to reinstate the workers’ representatives and pay their salaries and outstanding arrears.

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 would have likely been sufficient to deter violations if enforced. The law also extends culpability for all crimes to accomplices and corporate entities. Although the statutory penalties are fairly severe, the government did not enforce the law effectively, in part due to a lack of capacity to investigate trafficking and limited labor inspection and remediation resources. 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 an out-of-court settlement.

There continued to be anecdotal reports of hereditary servitude imposed on former slaves in some chiefdoms in the North Region. Many members of the Kirdi—whose ethnic group practiced predominately Christian and traditional faiths and who had been enslaved by the Muslim Fulani in the 1800s—continued to work for traditional Fulani rulers for compensation, in room and board and generally a low and unregulated salary, 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 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 exploitive 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/> (<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>).

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits 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 cannot legally perform, including moving heavy objects, undertaking dangerous and unhealthy tasks, working in confined areas, and prostitution. Employers are required to provide skills training to children between ages 14 and 18. Because compulsory education ends at age 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 in cocoa production. The government in 2018 earmarked funds for the Ministry of Labor and Social Security to revise the hazardous work list. There were no reported developments or progress achieved as of late November. The law provides penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment for those who violate child labor laws. These penalties likely would have been sufficient to deter violations, if enforced.

Children worked in agriculture, where they were exposed to hazardous conditions, including handling heavy loads, machetes, and agricultural chemicals. Children worked in mining, where they carried heavy loads and were exposed to dangerous conditions. Children worked as street vendors and in fishing, where they were exposed to hazardous conditions. Children in these sectors mainly worked alongside families and not under formal employers. Children were subjected to forced begging as *talibes* in Quran schools. Children were recruited or coerced by armed groups to work as porters, scouts, cooks, and child soldiers.

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> (<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 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, especially in the private sector. Ethnic groups often gave preferential treatment to members of their respective ethnic group in business and social practices, and 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.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The minimum wage in all sectors was greater than the World Bank’s international 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 is weekend or late-night overtime. Despite the minimum wage law, employers often negotiated with workers for lower salaries, 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 weekly rest.

The government sets health and safety standards in the workplace. The minister in charge of labor issues establishes the list of occupational diseases in consultation with the National Commission on Industrial Hygiene and Safety. These 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.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for national enforcement of the minimum wage and work hour standards, but it did not enforce the law. Ministry inspectors and occupational health physicians are responsible for monitoring health and safety standards, but the ministry lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program. The government more than doubled the total number of labor inspectors, but the number of labor inspectors was still insufficient. Moreover, the government did not provide adequate access to vehicles or computers, hampering the effectiveness of the inspectors.

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