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### 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cameroon

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution establishes the state as secular, prohibits religious harassment, and provides for freedom of religion and worship.

According to media reports and religious leaders, a significant portion of abuses involving religious freedom continued to occur in the predominantly English-speaking Northwest and Southwest Regions (NOSO), where violence associated with a separatist crisis continued. Because religion, ethnicity, and political ideology are closely linked, it was often difficult to determine whether incidents were predominantly motivated by religion. In January, security forces killed a member of a secret society as he and colleagues performed traditional rituals during a memorial service in Bambui, Northwest Region. In July, security forces looking for separatists burned down the Mejang village palace, considered sacred in Northwest Region, killing the traditional ruler's mother. Both incidents sparked widespread outrage. Religious leaders expressed frustration with the government's long-running failure to register new religious groups and said many requests were pending, some for a decade or longer.

The U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued to launch violent attacks against local communities, disrupt church activities, and cause Christians to live in fear in the Far North Region. The overall number of terrorist incidents increased during the year, following a decrease the year prior. In August, ISIS-WA terrorists killed eight fishermen on the island of Darak in Lake Chad, where the limited presence of security and government authorities allowed them to establish a base from which to carry out attacks against

those who oppose their ideology, including Christians. In June, during the feast of Eid al-Adha, ISIS-WA terrorists kidnapped 13 individuals, including women and children, in Mordas in the Far North Region and took them to their base in the Lake Chad Basin.

In July, violent clashes between the Christian Hourza community and the Muslim Mandara community in Warba, Far North Region, resulted in the death of two Muslims, multiple other casualties, the burning of many shops and at least one mosque, and the displacement of 4,574 people. Calm only returned after the intervention of security forces. Longstanding tensions between mostly Muslim Mbororo-Fulani herders and mainly Christian local populations over land disputes have worsened since the start of the NOSO separatist crisis in 2017, according to human rights experts. In April, Fulani herders kidnapped at least 25 persons in Ako, Northwest Region, during a weeklong series of attacks. In July, suspected Fulani militias attacked two individuals in Acha Tugi, Northwest Region, killing a man and seriously injuring his wife. In September, the nongovernmental organizations (NGO) Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa reported that Mbororo-Fulani herders carried out at least five killings in the Northwest Region in the first half of the year.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with government officials and traditional leaders to discuss issues including the need for interfaith dialogue, the danger posed by the crisis in NOSO to religious practitioners, the education of young Muslim girls, and the problem of child marriage in predominantly Muslim communities. In September, embassy officials met with the Grand Imams and Regional Council presidents of the North and Adamawa Regions and discussed the state of religious affairs in their regions. Embassy officials met with multiple religious leaders, including the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) moderator, members of the *Cameroon* Association for Interreligious Dialogue (ACADIR), the director of Caritas Kumbo (the development arm of the Catholic Diocese of Kumbo), and evangelical leaders, such as the pastors of Harvest Intercontinental Unlimited and the Full Gospel Mission. They discussed the ability of individual groups to practice their religions freely and the limitations on religious freedom resulting from cultural practices and the NOSO crisis.

## Section I.

### Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.1 million (mid-year 2023). The CIA World Factbook estimates that as of 2018, 38.3 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 25.5 percent Protestant, 6.9 percent other Christian denominations, 24.4 percent Muslim, 2.2 percent animist, 0.5 percent other religions, and 2.2 percent no religious affiliation. Sunnis account for the overwhelming majority of Muslims, with Shia making up less than 1 percent of the Muslim population. The 2020 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project found that 38.3 percent

of Christians are Catholic, and 31.4 percent are Protestant. There is a growing number of Christian revivalist churches. "Other Christian denominations" include Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, and Orthodox churches.

Christians reside primarily in the southern and western parts of the country. NOSO is largely Protestant, and the South, Center, East, Littoral, and West Regions are mostly Catholic. The Mbororo ethnic community is mostly Muslim and located primarily in the North, Far North, Northwest, Adamawa, and East Regions, where the highest percentage of Muslims also reside; the Bamoun ethnic group is also predominantly Muslim and located in the West Region. Many Muslims, Christians, and members of other faiths also adhere to some aspects of traditional beliefs.

## Section II.

### Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution establishes the state as secular, prohibits harassment or discrimination on grounds of religion, and provides for freedom of religion.

The law on freedom of association governs relations between the government and religious groups. The government must approve religious groups or institutions as a prerequisite for lawful operation. Although the law prescribes no specific penalties for operating without official registration, the government may suspend the activities of unregistered groups. The government does not require Indigenous religious groups to register, characterizing the practice of traditional religion as a private concern observed by members of a particular ethnic or kinship group or the residents of a particular locality.

To become a registered entity, a religious group must legally qualify as a religious congregation, defined as "any group of natural persons or corporate bodies whose vocation is divine worship" or "any group of persons living in community in accordance with a religious doctrine." The entity must submit a request for registration as a religious group and include with it the group's charter describing planned activities, names and functions of the group's officials, and a declaration of commitment to comply with the law on freedom of association to the relevant local office. The relevant local office then forwards the documents to the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MINAT).

MINAT reviews the file and sends it to the Presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. Registration is granted by presidential decree. Official registration confers no general tax benefits but allows religious groups to receive real estate for the conduct of

activities as a tax-free gift and to gather publicly and worship. It also permits missionaries for registered groups to receive visas with longer validity than do missionaries for unregistered entities. Unregistered religious groups may gather publicly and worship under a policy of “administrative tolerance” as long as public security and peace are not disturbed. Most unregistered religious groups operate under the umbrella of a registered religious group, adopting that group’s name and submitting to the registered group’s oversight.

MINAT may issue an order to suspend any religious group for “disturbing public order,” although no legislation defines these terms. The President may dissolve any previously authorized religious organization that “deviates from its initial focus.”

The Ministry of Basic Education and the Ministry of Secondary Education require private religious schools to comply with the same curriculum, infrastructure, and teacher-training standards as state-operated schools. Unlike public schools, private schools may offer religious education.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

### Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Media sources and religious leaders attributed many abuses of religious freedom to the crisis involving predominantly English-speaking separatists in NOSO and the activities of non-state actors in the Far North Region. Because religion, ethnicity, and political ideology are closely linked, it was often difficult to determine whether incidents were primarily motivated by religion.

In January, security forces killed a member of a secret society as he and his colleagues performed traditional rituals during a memorial service in Bambui, Northwest Region. According to media reports, the soldiers fired shots in the air and beat people indiscriminately as they attempted to flee. Frightened members of the secret society threw off their sacred masks, which locals considered a sacrilege, and ran away with the rest of the population. The soldiers removed the mask, traditional attire, and cowries the dead man had been wearing, placed them on his corpse, and took pictures, prompting outrage over what the community viewed as a desecration of their traditional practices.

In April, a security officer fired shots at women exiting the Full Gospel Mission Church building in Mile 4, Nkwen, Northwest Region, after an all-night prayer service. According to the women, after the security officer confronted them and demanded their destination, he accused them of harboring separatists and raised his firearm, saying he would shoot them. The women fled and, according to witnesses who did not leave the church

out of fear, he fired three shots in their direction. The incident did not result in any casualties. According to one of the leaders of Full Gospel Mission Mile 4, following the incident, the church suspended all worship sessions between 6:00 pm and 6:00 am. As of year's end, evening services had resumed, although with limited attendance.

In July, security forces looking for separatists burned down the Mejang Palace, Northwest Region, killing the traditional ruler's mother. The incident sparked widespread outrage in the Northwest Region where royal palaces are viewed as sacred sites of culture and identity and a link between communities and their ancestors. In a July 10 public statement, Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) Moderator Samuel Forba Fonki accused the perpetrators of "attacking the gods of the land and of having turned a sacred site into a battlefield." Fonki said separatists had been using the Mejang Palace as a base after chasing away the traditional ruler and described the attack as evidence that government forces and nonstate armed groups (NSAGs) had no respect for sacred sites.

In August, authorities arrested and detained 12 dissident members of a parish of the Union of Evangelical Churches of Cameroon (UEEC) in Mandjou, East Region. The arrests followed infighting between a group of Christians led by Pastor Timothy Dagba and a dissident group, led by church elder Martin Assoumdai. According to the civil society organization (CSO) Mandela Center International, on August 27, Angele Dizangue, Divisional Officer of Mandjou, led a unit of security officers to evict Assoumdai from the church presbytery and arrested him, his wife, and 10 other dissidents. They remained in detention at the Mandjou Gendarmerie brigade until September 1, when they were referred to the courts and released on bail. According to the Mandela Center, because of pressure from civil society, the courts did not press charges.

In July, security officials at the Gendarmerie brigade at Nkolmesseng, Yaounde interrogated and detained Pastor Zacharias Tanee Ikome of Christian Missionary Fellowship Miracle Center after receiving a complaint about his religious activities. The gendarmes summoned Ikome after his neighbor described his preaching as "perverted" and accused him of corrupting minors. According to media reports, the gendarmes denied Ikome access to his lawyer during his interrogation. Ikome later secured his release from detention under circumstances that remained unclear at year's end.

### Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

In June, the Menchum Council of Traditional Rulers accused Abdoullahi Aliou, senior divisional officer (SDO) of Menchum, Northwest Region, of violating their sacred customs and traditions by interfering in the enthronement of a new traditional ruler for Esu village. Months after the 2022 murder of the Esu traditional ruler, in a June 8 press release, Aliou asked prospective applicants to submit their candidacies to his office. The

Council of Traditional Rulers said royal succession in Menchum was determined solely by sacred rituals and customs and described any influence by the government as a violation of tradition. In a June 17 press conference, the Esu Cultural and Development Association described the SDO's press release as provocative and sacrilegious and said the Esu people would only enthrone a new leader after receiving a spiritual signal from their ancestors. As of year's end, the throne in Esu remained unoccupied.

In July, Mfoundi SDO Emmanuel Mariel Djikdent suspended worship services at the Nsimeyong Parish of the Evangelical Church of Cameroon (ECC) in Yaounde. Djikdent cited multiple reasons, including infighting, simultaneous scheduling of rival worship services, and the risk of violent confrontation within ECC Nsimeyong. The suspension took place within the context of a crisis where certain ECC members dissatisfied with the Church's financial management had attempted to create an independent religious group known as Decentralized Evangelical Church of Cameroon (D-ECC). When D-ECC applied for mandatory registration as a religious body, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji warned them against sowing confusion by using the identity of the ECC, which the government had previously registered. Atanga Nji later threatened to sanction D-ECC, which he characterized in a press release as "godless and lawless." Djikdent lifted the suspension after the ECC assigned a new pastor to the parish.

### **Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others**

As in previous years, there were reports of Jehovah's Witnesses students being expelled or sanctioned for refusing to sing the national anthem because of their religious convictions. Three court cases from previous years on this issue remained pending in the Supreme Court. The problem affected hundreds of students in the country. Teachers and school administrators refused to accommodate Jehovah's Witnesses minors who objected to singing the national anthem (and taking part in other patriotic ceremonies) in school. In some cases, students identified as Jehovah's Witnesses by their teachers were forced to stand in front of the class and sing the national anthem alone. While some schools granted accommodations, the group's representatives stated they did not obtain the type of broad relief that a policy or Ministry-level decision would provide, despite high-level meetings with the Prime Minister's office and MINAT. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives reported generally excellent relations with the government except for this issue.

The government took no action to adjudicate registration applications by several religious groups that had been pending for years. The government had approved only one new religious group in the previous 14 years and none since 2020. Although by law groups must register, the government continued to allow hundreds of unregistered small religious groups to

operate under a policy of “administrative tolerance,” often under the name and oversight of registered religious groups. According to one evangelical pastor, some registered churches, including those that no longer had an active congregation of their own, marketed their licenses to their unregistered counterparts for a fee. He said this phenomenon empowered registered churches to sometimes impose restrictions on the religious practices of unregistered groups. Restrictions were sometimes based on theological differences, and other times, based on perceived profiteering from religion, including selling holy water and holy stones. According to one umbrella organization representing Muslims, the government’s insistence on registration was mainly aimed at preventing faith-based organizations from receiving foreign assistance without supervision. He also said the registration process was often delayed due to lengthy background checks. The result was that older, more established religious groups had more freedom to practice than newer, primarily independent evangelical churches. Despite the state’s administrative tolerance, unregistered status had practical consequences, including making it impossible for unregistered churches to open bank accounts in their own name.

The government continued to grant broad legal authority to traditional leaders to manage their districts. As part of this authority, traditional leaders continued to exercise control over local mosques, with the right to appoint or dismiss imams. Traditional leaders did not have this same authority over the appointment or dismissal of other religious figures.

State-sponsored radio stations and the sole state-sponsored television station continued to broadcast Christian and Islamic religious services and ceremonies regularly on national holidays and during national events. Government ministers and other officials often attended these ceremonies.

The government provided an annual subsidy to all private primary and secondary education institutions, including religious schools. The size of the subsidy was proportional to the size of the student body.

In January, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders issued a public statement welcoming the Canadian government’s announcement that it would assist in mediation between the Cameroonian government and NOSO separatists, urging believers of all religions to pray for peace in the two regions. The government, however, denied it had agreed to participate in mediation and the talks never occurred.

## **ACTIONS BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS**

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued to commit terrorist acts in the Far North Region in what observers said was an attempt to impose their religious and political beliefs. Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued to target Muslims, Christians, and traditionalist believers without apparent

distinction. According to NGO International Crisis Group, as of September, Boko Haram and ISIS-WA had killed approximately 3,000 persons in the Far North Region and forced the displacement of another 250,000 since Boko Haram attacks began in 2014.

In 2023, the Christian advocacy and charitable organization Open Doors International, whose mission is to support Christians it considers persecuted, identified acts of violence by Islamic extremist and terrorist groups as the leading driver of Christian persecution in Cameroon. They said Christian women faced the danger of abduction by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA. According to Open Doors International, Boko Haram and ISIS-WA disrupted or hindered worship activities and their attacks displaced hundreds of thousands of individuals, which prevented the normal functioning of churches in the Far North Region. The organization also reported that owning Christian literature, such as Bibles, could elicit threats and violence, forcing many Christians to practice their faith clandestinely.

In August, ISIS-WA terrorists killed eight fishermen on the island of Darak in Lake Chad. According to media reports, ISIS-WA had taken advantage of the limited presence of security forces and government authorities to establish a firm presence in the area and used that presence to carry out attacks against those who opposed their ideology, including Christians.

According to media reports, in June, during the feast of Eid al-Adha, ISIS-WA terrorists kidnapped 13 individuals, including women and children, in Mordas in the Far North Region and took them to their base in the Lake Chad Basin. The fate of these kidnap victims was unknown at year's end.

According to media sources, in May, former Boko Haram captive, Ibrahim Ngaroua, who escaped during the year after being held prisoner with his family for several years, told students of the Yaounde-based Heritage Higher Institute of Peace and Development Studies that the terrorists forced all their captives to read the Quran and publicly flogged anyone for wrongdoing. Ngaroua said the terrorists separated the women from the men, forced the women to wear burqas, and used them as sex slaves.

According to the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL), in March, unidentified individuals kidnapped and killed Bible translator William Gemuh Wuwih in Mfumte, Northwest Region. Wuwih had been supervising Bible translation into the Mfumte cluster of languages. His assailants kidnapped him on March 17 as he returned home. CABTAL attributed Wuwih's killing to the violence between separatists and government forces in NOSO, which posed dangers to Bible translators.

In September, unidentified gunmen shot Catholic priest and Mill Hill Missionary Elvis Mbangsi multiple times at a primary school within St.

Martin of Tour's Kembong Parish in Mamfe Diocese, Southwest Region. The Mamfe Diocese communications director said four gunmen entered the school on motorbikes and targeted Mbangsi. After identifying him when he emerged from the parish house, they forced him to sit on the ground alongside three teachers and shot him four times in the limbs. The assailants shot each of the three teachers twice in the legs. According to the Association for Catholic Information in Africa, the incident happened after several attacks by NSAGs targeting clergy in other parishes. In October, a Full Gospel Mission pastor said NSAGs regularly attacked clergy for criticizing their actions.

In September, suspected separatists kidnapped several Catholic priests in Bamessing, Northwest Region. The priests were returning to their parishes within Kumbo Diocese in the Northwest Region after participating in a religious activity at the Archdiocese of Bamenda. According to Daniel Ache, a priest and Coordinator of Caritas Kumbo, the separatists released the priests on the same day after holding them captive for several hours. The circumstances of their release remained unclear at year's end. In October, a Yaounde-based evangelical pastor said NSAGs often kidnapped clergy because they believed their followers would readily pay exorbitant ransoms.

In May, suspected separatists interrupted a Sunday service at Word of Life and Transformation Ministry in Munyenge, Southwest Region and assaulted worshippers. According to media sources, the separatists entered the church during the sermon and ordered all the worshipers to lie on the floor, after which the separatists beat them. Media sites featured pictures of worshipers with multiple lacerations on their backs and limbs after the incident. The worshipers stated they believed they were targeted because they refused to live among the separatists in the forest to help shield them from military attacks.

Violence between government forces and separatists in NOSO continued to limit freedom of worship. In multiple instances, Christians reported they could not attend Sunday worship services because of lockdowns imposed by separatists. For example, according to a Bamenda-based Catholic priest, many worship services were either canceled or sparsely attended on Sunday, March 12, after separatists imposed a lockdown that they announced was intended to disrupt elections. According to NGO Rural Women Center for Education and Development), regular gunfire exchanges between separatists and the military, numerous checkpoints, and illegal patrols by separatists limited participation in worship services. Fear of separatist interference regularly compelled Muslims in Bamenda to request heightened security at major mosques in the town during worship services on religious feast days. In October, a pastor of the Full Gospel Mission said many churches had closed and numerous members of the clergy had fled because of violence in NOSO.

In July, separatists occupied the premises of the PCC in Baba I, Northwest Region, and disrupted worship services for a two-week period. The pastor, who was absent when the separatists arrived, did not return during that period, and parishioners suspended all worship services and other activities at the church. Worship services resumed after the separatists departed and the pastor returned.

### Section III.

## Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in July, violent clashes between the Christian Hourza community and the Muslim Mandara community in Warba, Far North Region, resulted in the death of two Muslims, multiple other casualties, the burning of many shops and at least one mosque, and the displacement of 4,574 persons. Calm only returned after the intervention of security forces. According to Mora Mayor Chetima Hamidou, the clashes started after a July 19 attack on a Christian businessman, Adjé Luc. In retaliation, Luc's supporters destroyed the property of his Muslim economic rival and killed two of his relatives, wounding many others. Many locals attributed the clashes to longstanding tensions over economic opportunities and disputes over land between the two communities. Prior to the clashes, the two sides had circulated messages containing hate speech and targeting each other on social media.

According to a Bamenda-based human rights lawyer, longstanding tensions between mostly Muslim Mbororo-Fulani herders and mainly Christian local populations over land disputes worsened since the start of the NOSO crisis in 2017. In April, media outlets reported Fulani herders kidnapped at least 25 individuals in Ako, Northwest Region, during a weeklong series of attacks. According to media reports, in July, suspected Fulani militias attacked two individuals in Acha Tugi, Northwest Region, killing a man and seriously injuring his wife. In September, the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa reported that Mbororo-Fulani herders carried out at least five killings in the Northwest Region in the first half of the year. According to NGO Amnesty International, separatist groups perceived Mbororo-Fulani as voting for the dominant political party and accused them of collaborating with the government military.

In March, unidentified individuals kidnapped and killed Oliver Ntse Ebode, a priest of the Gallican Catholic Church (not affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church) in Obala, Center Region. According to Vatican News Agency Agenzia Fides, Ebode's killers came to his house in the evening of March 1 and requested he visit a relative of theirs who was ill and needed

his religious services. After Ebode got into their car to drive to the destination, they killed him and threw his body from the car. Passers-by discovered his body the following morning.

Also in March, members of the secret society at the palace of the traditional ruler in Nkambe, Northwest Region, known as "Palace Juju," clashed with Apostolic Christians. Following a verbal altercation, masked members of the secret society entered the church's premises, assaulted the pastor and multiple other Christians, some of whom were later hospitalized, and destroyed much of the church's property. Months after the Apostolic Church filed a lawsuit against the traditional leaders, the two sides announced their reconciliation and said the case had been dropped. The traditional leaders offered the church 1.5 million CFA (\$2,500) in compensation for the damage, but the church declined, emphasizing instead the need for a relationship based on peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Members of the Nkambe traditional council attended a worship service at the Apostolic church that both sides viewed as a sign of goodwill and a way to strengthen their relationship.

In June, Divisional Officer (an administrative position) Roland Guy-Aime Bitoumou temporarily closed the Louggeo Dubai Mosque in Maroua III Subdivision, Far North Region after a dispute between rival groups of worshippers led to the stabbing of two individuals. The dispute arose between Imam Oumarou Abdourahman, appointed by the Lamido of Maroua (a traditional leader), and certain worshippers who accused the imam of changing prayer schedules, insulting worshippers, and banning the reading of public statements during worship. The imam, a Sunni Muslim, attributed the tension to ideological differences with his Shiite detractors. After initially resisting calls to dismiss Imam Abdourahman, the Lamido fired him as relations between the two sides continued to worsen. When the imam refused to step down and continued to lead prayers at the mosque, his opponents physically attacked him during a prayer session, leading to a violent brawl, during which two worshippers were stabbed. In October, Moussa Oumarou, Coordinator of the Cameroon Council of Imams and Muslim Dignitaries (CIDIMUC), said the government had reopened the mosque following the appointment of a new imam.

In July, Mohaman Ahman, a traditional leader of the Idool community in Adamawa, Far North Region, filed a lawsuit against 17-year-old Mazourka Oummou Hani at the Ngaoundere Court of First Instance, alleging she sacrilegiously depicted a local deity in a novel she wrote. Published in May, the book painted an unflattering picture of a fictional village ancestor who considered himself a god. Known as "Sidi", the fictional character bore the same name as the Idool deity, an ancestor and village founder. Ahman described the book as blasphemous in its treatment of the Idool deity, sought 150 million CFA (\$253,000) in damages, and urged the government to ban the book. Oummou Hani described the choice of

name as coincidental and said Idool villagers repeatedly harassed and sent her death threats after the book's publication. Following mediation by the Ministry of Arts and Culture, Oummou Hani apologized and promised to remove the portions of the book that caused offense. Ahman promised to withdraw the lawsuit against her at the Ngaoundere Court of First Instance.

According to a Muslim religious leader, Muslims in Ngaoundere, Adamawa Region, remained divided following the March 2022 dismissal of the Grand Imam of Ngaoundere by the area's Lamido, a traditional leader. According to CIDIMUC, the dispute was over theological differences between the Lamido and the imam. According to local Muslim religious leaders, the Lamido traditionally has the power to appoint imams in his territory. The imam, nonetheless, joined a Douala-based association to finance the construction of his own mosque without the approval of the Lamido. As of October, the dispute had not been resolved.

In May, the Cameroon Islamic Union and the Council of Protestant Churches in Cameroon organized a three-day workshop that focused on women's empowerment as a basic human right and as a means of assuring sustainable peace.

In July, CIDIMUC organized a conference on Islam, Peace, and the Empowerment of Women and Youth. At least 1,500 attendees, including Muslim clerics, scholars, and researchers called for the religious, political, social, and economic emancipation of women based on Islamic teachings.

In October, ACADIR organized a forum in the Northwest Region that focused on the consolidation of peace in NOSO through interreligious dialogue. Participants, including religious leaders, women, and youth, explored ways to promote a culture of forgiveness, tolerance, and acceptance.

According to the Grand Imam of Garoua, multiple local imams, and council presidents, most Muslim students in the North Region received secular education that is supplemented – not replaced – by Quranic schools.

## Section IV.

### U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. Embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the presidents of the Adamawa and North Regional Councils, imams, and traditional leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including the need for inter-faith dialogue, the danger posed by the crisis in NOSO to religious practitioners, the education of young Muslim girls, and the problem of child marriage in predominantly Muslim communities. The meetings with the Regional Council presidents and imams explored the role of Quranic schools in their communities and the misperception that

Islam excluded young girls from education and inhibited the teaching of secular subjects.

During the year, embassy officials met with multiple religious leaders including the PCC Moderator, members of ACADIR, the Director of Caritas Kumbo, imams in the Adamawa and North Regions, and evangelical leaders, such as the pastors of Harvest Intercontinental Unlimited and the Full Gospel Mission. During these meetings, the embassy discussed with faith leaders the ability of individual faith-based organizations to freely practice their religions. They also discussed the limitations on religious freedom resulting from cultural practices and the NOSO crisis and explored ways in which the embassy could collaborate with faith leaders to promote interfaith dialogue and social cohesion.

In January, the embassy celebrated on social media the efforts of Desmond Ngala, who participated in an embassy-sponsored leadership program in the United States, for his efforts to mitigate hate speech and build trust between different religious and ethnic communities.

In February, the Ambassador visited the Far North Region, where he met the Lamido of Maroua and discussed efforts within the Muslim community to promote the education of young girls and discourage child marriages.

In June, the Ambassador visited the West Region, where he met the Catholic bishop of the Bafoussam Diocese and members of the country's National Episcopal Conference (NECC). They discussed NECC's program that involves NECC partnering with 15 faith-based organizations, among other CSOs, to provide community care and support services for children under 18 living with, affected by, or at risk of contracting HIV.

As part of activities to celebrate World Peace Day in September, the embassy's "American Corner" public resource center in Douala hosted a dialogue on religious tolerance and the promotion of peace building.

In October, embassy officials met with the CIDIMUC and discussed efforts by the group to resolve specific cases of tensions within the Muslim community resulting from disputes over Islamic theology. Meetings with Muslim leaders in the Adamawa, Littoral, and North Regions similarly highlighted the differences in approach between conservatives and reformists within the Muslim community and how to reconcile those differences.

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