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Amnesty International Annual Report 2011 - Cameroon

Head of state: **Paul Biya**

Head of government: **Philémon Yang**

Death penalty: **abolitionist in practice**

Population: **20 million**

Life expectancy: **51.7 years**

Under-5 mortality (m/f): **151/136 per 1,000**

Adult literacy: **75.9 per cent**

The government continued to restrict the activities of political opponents and journalists and to stifle freedom of expression. One journalist died in custody. Detention conditions remained harsh and often life-threatening. People engaging in same-sex sexual relations faced arrest and imprisonment. Members of the security forces implicated in human rights violations in February 2008 continued to enjoy impunity. At least 77 prisoners were on death row.

Background

Ahead of elections scheduled for late 2011, fears grew of potential instability after 28 years of rule by President Paul Biya. Opposition leaders accused the President of undermining the powers of the electoral commission, known as Election Cameroon (ELECAM). Parliament, dominated by the ruling Democratic Assembly of the Cameroonian People (RDPC), passed a bill in March giving the government oversight of poll preparations through the Ministry of Territorial Administration – a task previously carried out by ELECAM.

In September, President Biya reshuffled his government and replaced senior security service officials.

Armed clashes in the Bakassi region continued during the year. On 18 March the government announced that 19 soldiers of the elite Delta Rapid Intervention Battalion had been convicted for "acts of brutality against civilians" following clashes in February in the Bakassi Peninsula in which 24 civilians had been injured. Insecurity increased off the Bakassi coast, with boats being captured by a group calling itself African Marine Commando, and sailors being held hostage or killed.

In May, a Cameroon-Nigeria mixed commission started further demarcation of a disputed boundary that was settled by a decision of the International Court of Justice in 2002.

The government was reportedly planning to abolish female genital mutilation in its revision of the Penal Code.

Corruption charges

Dozens of former government officials and heads of state companies, some of them arrested during 2010, remained in custody awaiting trial on charges of corruption. Many of them claimed that the charges against them were motivated by political differences or jealousy.

- At the end of the year, prisoners Titus Edzoa and Thierry Atangana were on trial on new charges of corruption brought against them, barely two years before they were due to complete the 15-year prison sentence they received in 1997. Their trial in 1997 had been unfair – it ended in the early hours of the morning, without the assistance of legal counsel – and was apparently politically motivated. Titus Edzoa had resigned as a senior government official to stand for president and Thierry Atangana was accused of being his campaign manager.

Freedom of expression

The government sought to silence critics of its policies, including journalists and human rights defenders.

- Germain Cyrille Ngota, managing editor of the *Cameroon Express*, one of three journalists detained in March, died in custody in April. He was allegedly not given any medical treatment during his detention and members of his family claimed he had been tortured. A government inquiry, whose proceedings were not public, concluded that he had died from natural causes but its findings were disputed by

journalists and human rights defenders. Robert Mintya, director of the magazine *Le Devoir*, and Serge Sabouang, director of the bi-monthly *La Nation*, who had been arrested with Germain Cyrille Ngota and claimed to have been tortured, continued to face charges of fraud and using false documents. Robert Mintya was assaulted by a fellow inmate in August and was hospitalized for several weeks as a result. Robert Mintya and Serge Sabouang were released in November, reportedly on the orders of President Paul Biya, but the charges against them were not dropped.

- The trial of three journalists and a teacher arrested after a televised debate in 2008 opened in January but was postponed at least six times during 2010. Alex Gustave Azebaze and Thierry Ngogang of the independent television channel STV2, Anani Rabier Bindji of Canal2 and university teacher Aboya Manassé faced charges of revealing confidential information for discussing Operation Epervier, a government anti-corruption initiative.
- Lewis Medjo, director of *La Détente Libre* newspaper, who was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in January 2009, was released in June.
- Former mayor Paul Eric Kingué and musician Pierre Roger Lambo Sandjo were serving prison sentences after they were convicted of involvement in the February 2008 riots. Human rights defenders in Cameroon maintained that Paul Eric Kingué was detained because he protested against unlawful killings of alleged rioters and Pierre Roger Lambo Sandjo because he composed a song criticizing the amendment of the Constitution that allowed President Biya to stand for president again.

Freedom of association and assembly

The government continued to curtail the activities of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), a non-violent secessionist group, whose members faced arrest and imprisonment. Non-violent activities of political organizations and civil society groups were similarly subject to official sanction.

- In November, seven trade union members were arrested following a public demonstration organized by the Central Public Sector Union (CSP) in front of the office of the Prime Minister in Yaoundé. They included Jean-Marc Bikoko, President of the CSP, and leading members of several education trade unions. They were charged with offences relating to an unauthorized demonstration, and their trial was continuing at the end of the year.
- Journalists protesting against the death in custody of newspaper editor Germain Cyrille Ngota were prevented by police from staging a sit-down protest on World Press Freedom Day in May. Some claimed to have been beaten by police.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people

The Penal Code criminalizes same-sex sexual relations and even the National Human Rights Commission refuses to recognize and defend the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Arrests, prosecutions and trials of gay men continued during 2010 on a regular basis. Those imprisoned were prisoners of conscience.

- Fabien Mballa and Aboma Nkoa Emile were arrested on 24 March by gendarmes in Camp Yeyap, Yaoundé. They were sentenced by the criminal court of Yaoundé to five months' imprisonment and fines, and were held in Kondengui prison.
- Roger Bruno Efaaba Efaaba and Marc Henri Bata, who were arrested in September on suspicion of theft, but then accused of same-sex activities, were subjected to forced anal medical examinations in October, a form of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. They remained in custody at the end of the year.

Prison conditions

Prisons and other detention centres were overcrowded and conditions were often life-threatening. Medical care and food were often not provided or were inadequate. Disturbances and escape attempts were frequent, and several prisoners were killed during escape attempts. Prison guards were poorly trained, ill-equipped and their numbers inadequate for a large prison population.

Kondengui prison, which was built for 700 inmates, was holding 3,852 in August. Food, water and medical supplies were all in short supply. In one wing, known as Kosovo, there was not enough room for prisoners to sleep lying down. Another wing held mentally ill detainees who did not receive any psychiatric care.

Douala (New Bell) prison, with an official capacity of 700, held more than 2,453 inmates in August. Many of its inmates were in pre-trial detention and were held together with convicted prisoners. Some prisoners were held in leg irons.

Prisoners were reported to have died in Maroua prison because of the scorching heat, and in Ngaoundere prison as a result of cholera.

Impunity

Government officials confirmed that no action had been taken against members of the security forces accused of human rights violations in 2008, when as many as 100 people were killed during protests against price rises and against a constitutional amendment that removed limits on presidential terms of office.

Death penalty

At least 77 prisoners were on death row, although no executions have been reported since 1997. There were concerns that a presidential decree issued in May to commute some death sentences to life imprisonment had not yet been fully implemented. Prisoners on death row were not informed why their sentences were not commuted.

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