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Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Cameroon

The armed group Boko Haram continued to commit serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in the Far North region, including looting and destroying properties and killing and abducting civilians. In response, the authorities and security forces committed human rights violations and crimes under international law, including arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, torture and deaths in custody. As a result of the conflict, around 240,000 people in the Far North region had fled their homes between 2014 and the end of 2017. Freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly continued to be restricted throughout the country. Security forces violently repressed demonstrations in Anglophone regions in January and September. Civil society activists, journalists, trade unionists and teachers were arrested and some faced trial before military courts.

Abuses by armed groups

The armed group Boko Haram committed crimes under international law and human rights abuses, including suicide bombings in civilian areas, summary executions, abductions, recruitment of child soldiers, and looting and destruction of public and private property. During the year, the group carried out at least 150 attacks, including 48 suicide bombings, killing at least 250 civilians. The crimes were part of a widespread and systematic attack on the civilian population across the Lake Chad basin. Boko Haram deliberately targeted civilians in attacks on markets, mosques, commercial areas and other public places. On 12 July a female suicide bomber detonated explosives in a crowded video-game shop in the town of Waza, killing at least 16 civilians and injuring more than 30. On 5 August, a suicide bomber in the village of Ouro Kessoum, near Amchide, killed eight children and injured four more.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Security forces continued to arbitrarily arrest individuals accused of supporting Boko Haram, often with little or no evidence and sometimes using unnecessary or excessive force. Those arrested were frequently detained in inhumane, life-threatening conditions. At least 101 people were detained incommunicado between March 2013 and March 2017 in a series of military bases run by the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) and facilities run by the intelligence agency. They were subjected to torture and

other ill-treatment.¹ (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/cameroon/report-cameroon/#endnote-1>) These routine and systematic practices continued throughout 2017, although at least 20 people were reported to have been transferred from the BIR military base in Salak to the central prison in Maroua in late August.

It was highly likely that senior military officers based in Salak were aware of the torture, but they did nothing to prevent it. US military personnel also had a regular presence at the BIR's base at Salak and an investigation was launched into their possible knowledge of human rights violations at the base; its outcomes were not published during the year.

No investigations were known to have been conducted by the Cameroonian authorities into the allegations of incommunicado detention, torture and other ill-treatment, nor efforts made to prevent such occurrences or to prosecute and punish the perpetrators.

In December the UN Committee against Torture expressed deep concern about the use of torture and incommunicado detention, and criticized the failure by Cameroonian authorities to clarify whether investigations were being carried out.

Freedoms of expression, association and assembly

Human rights defenders, including civil society activists, journalists, trade unionists, lawyers and teachers continued to be intimidated, harassed and threatened.

On 17 January, following protests in the English-speaking regions of the country, the Minister of Territorial Administration banned the activities of the political party Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) and the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC).² (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/cameroon/report-cameroon/#endnote-2>) The same day, the president of the CACSC, barrister Nkongho Felix Agbor-Balla, and its Secretary General, Dr Fontem Aforteka'a Neba, were arrested after signing a statement calling for non-violent protests. Held incommunicado at the State Defence Secretariat, they were charged under the 2014 anti-terrorism law, without any basis. They were transferred to the Prison Principale in the capital, Yaoundé, before eventually being released following a presidential decision on 30 August, along with 53 other Anglophone protesters who had been arrested between late October 2016 and February 2017.

Between January and April, and in early October, telephone and internet services were cut in the English-speaking regions, with no official explanation.

On 24 May, authorities shut down an Amnesty International press conference scheduled to take place in Yaoundé. Amnesty International staff had planned to present more than 310,000 letters and petitions asking President Biya to release three students

imprisoned for 10 years for sharing a joke by text message about Boko Haram. No written administrative justification was provided for the prohibition of the press conference.

More than 20 protesters were shot by security forces in the Anglophone regions between 1 and 2 October, and more than 500 arrested. Others wounded in the protests were forced to flee hospitals where they sought life-saving treatment out of fear of arrest. In addition, dozens of members of the security forces, including soldiers and gendarmes, were killed in attacks perpetrated by Anglophone insurgents in the South and North West regions during the year.

Unfair trials

Unfair trials continued before military courts, which were often marred by irregularities.

On 10 April, Radio France Internationale correspondent Ahmed Abba was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, convicted by the Yaoundé Military Court of “complicity with and non-denunciation of terrorist acts”. The trial was marred by irregularities, including documents not being disclosed to defence lawyers. Ahmed Abba had been arrested in Maroua in July 2015 and was tortured while held incommunicado for three months at a facility run by the General Directorate of External Research. On 21 December the Appeal Court of the Yaoundé Military Court ordered his initial sentence to be reduced to 24 months, which he had already served. The Court upheld the charge of “non-denunciation of terrorism”.

The appeal of Fomusoh Ivo Feh, who was arrested in December 2014 for forwarding a sarcastic text message about Boko Haram and sentenced to 10 years in prison, had not begun at the end of the year. Scheduled to begin in December 2016, his hearings had been adjourned at least seven times.

On 30 October, journalists Rodrigue Tongué, Felix Ebole Bola and Baba Wamé were acquitted by the Yaoundé Military Court, having been initially charged in October 2014 with “non-denunciation of information and sources”. Facing trial alongside the journalists were opposition party leader Aboubakary Siddiki, and Abdoulaye Harissou, a well-known notary detained since August 2014. The Yaoundé Military Court sentenced Aboubakary Siddiki to 25 years' imprisonment on charges including hostility against the homeland, revolution, and contempt of the President. Abdoulaye Harissou was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, and subsequently released having already served this sentence. Their trial was marred by irregularities. During their initial period of detention, the two men had been held incommunicado for more than 40 days in an illegal facility run by the General Directorate of External Relations and subjected to torture.

Detention

Prison conditions remained poor, marked by chronic overcrowding, inadequate food, limited medical care, and deplorable hygiene and sanitation. Maroua prison housed around 1,500 detainees, more than four times its intended capacity. The population of the central prison in Yaoundé was approximately 4,400, despite a maximum capacity of 1,500. The main factors contributing to overcrowding included the mass arrests since 2014 of people accused of supporting Boko Haram, the large number of detainees held without charge, and the ineffective judicial system. The government finalized the construction of at least 10 new cells for the prison in Maroua.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

At least 250,000 refugees from the Central African Republic lived in harsh conditions in crowded camps or with host families along border areas of southeastern Cameroon. Some 60,000 refugees from Nigeria lived in the UN-run Minawao camp in the Far North region; around 30,000 others struggled to cope outside the camp, facing food insecurity, lack of access to basic services, harassment by the security forces and the risk of *refoulement* as they were perceived to be supporters of Boko Haram.

On 2 March, Cameroon, Nigeria and UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, signed a “Tripartite Agreement for the Voluntary Repatriation of Nigerian Refugees Living in Cameroon”. However, between January and September, Cameroon forcibly returned at least 4,400 Nigerians. These forced returns were part of a larger deportation operation carried out by Cameroon. Human Rights Watch estimated that, since 2015, Cameroonian authorities and security forces had summarily deported more than 100,000 Nigerians living in areas located along the Cameroon-Nigeria border, often with unnecessary and excessive use of force. Some of those forcibly returned, including children, weakened by living for months or years with limited or no access to food and health care, died during the deportations.

In December, UNHCR reported having registered more than 5,000 Cameroonians, mainly women and children, who had fled the Anglophone areas of Cameroon to Nigeria.

Right to an adequate standard of living

The conflict with Boko Haram led to the internal displacement of around 240,000 people in the Far North region and exacerbated the hardships experienced by communities, limiting their access to basic social services, and disrupting trade, farming and pastoralism. In December, almost 3.3 million people, of whom 61% were in the Far North region, were in need of humanitarian assistance, including food and medical care. Humanitarian access continued to be restricted by the ongoing conflict.

Right to education

Dozens of schools were closed in the English-speaking regions between November 2016 and September 2017, following strikes and boycotts called for by trade unions and members of civil society. Extreme elements within Anglophone pro-secession groups carried out attacks on education facilities that “breached the boycott”.

Between January and September 2017, more than 30 schools were burned and severely damaged. In the Far North region, 139 primary schools in the departments of Logone and Chari, Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga remained closed because of insecurity and at least eight were occupied by security forces, affecting almost 40,000 children.

Death penalty

People accused of supporting Boko Haram continued to be sentenced to death following unfair trials in military courts; none were executed during the year. The cases were all prosecuted under the deeply flawed 2014 anti-terrorism law.

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