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2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cameroon

Cameroon (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Cameroon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included prosecuting and convicting more alleged traffickers. The government extended the 2020-2021 national action plan (NAP) for an additional two years and conducted a range of trafficking awareness activities. It also launched a toll-free hotline to report human trafficking cases and established anti-trafficking committees in each of the divisions of the East Region. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, on its anti-trafficking capacity. Authorities did not report investigating allegations of security forces involvement in the sexual exploitation of women. The government investigated fewer trafficking cases and identified fewer victims. It did not pass draft anti-trafficking legislation, pending since 2012, that would remove the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion for child sex trafficking and correct the current law's confusion involving trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling. The government has not taken any action in response to reports of diplomats exploiting individuals in forced labor from previous reporting periods. Officials did not widely disseminate standard operating procedures (SOPs) on victim identification and referral to law enforcement or first responders. Because the government has devoted sufficient efforts to meet the minimum standards, Cameroon was granted a waiver per the Trafficking Victims Protection Act from an otherwise required downgrade to Tier 3. Therefore Cameroon remained on Tier 2 Watch List for a third consecutive year.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, including complicit officials, and adequately sentence convicted traffickers.
- Disseminate and train government officials on the National Referral System and Standard Operating Procedures (NRS/SOP) on victim identification and referral and systematically and proactively identify trafficking victims.
- Amend the anti-trafficking law to remove the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion for child sex trafficking crimes and to make a clear distinction between trafficking and smuggling.
- Further expand training for law enforcement and judicial officials, on the anti-trafficking section of the penal code to increase the effectiveness of investigations and prosecutions while respecting the rule of law and human rights and administer sufficiently stringent sentences to those convicted.
- Continue formal collaboration and coordination between government ministries and with NGOs on proactively identifying and protecting victims.
- Implement a systemic victim-witness program to increase protective services for victims participating in the criminal justice process and prevent re-traumatization.
- Increase financial and human resources to the government's anti-trafficking inter-ministerial committee (IMC), and regularly convene the committee in coordination with NGOs and international organizations.
- Publicize information to citizens on their rights as foreign workers and sources of assistance while abroad.
- Expand the investigation of labor recruiters and agencies suspected of fraudulent recruitment—including unlicensed recruiters and intermediaries—and prosecute those complicit in trafficking.
- Develop a robust and comprehensive data collection system to capture government-wide anti-trafficking efforts.

PROSECUTION

The government made mixed anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law criminalized some forms of sex trafficking and all forms of labor trafficking. Inconsistent with international law, Cameroon's legal framework required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking crime, and therefore did not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The law prescribed penalties of 10 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 to 1 million Central African francs (CFA) (\$86 – \$1,730), which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to some forms of sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. If the trafficking crime involved a victim who was age 15 or younger, the penalties increased to 15 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 to 10 million CFA (\$170 to \$17,300). The law prescribed separate penalties for debt bondage, which ranged from five to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 to 500,000 CFA (\$17 – \$860) and were also sufficiently stringent. The law was published in French and English, the two official languages of the government. The English version conflated trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling crimes by referring to trafficking in persons crimes, as defined under international law, as "slavery in persons," while referring to smuggling-related crimes as "trafficking in persons." Increasing the potential for conflating smuggling and trafficking in persons, Article 342 of Cameroon's 2016 Penal Code prohibited both "trafficking in persons" and "slavery in persons." Legislation drafted in 2012 to address victim and witness protection and correct inconsistencies with international law remained pending for the ninth consecutive year.

The government investigated 93 cases compared with 205 cases in 2020. The government reported prosecuting 57 suspects in 48 cases, compared with prosecuting four suspects in an unknown number of cases in 2020. Officials reported convicting at least seven traffickers under Section 342(1) of the Penal Code—sentencing them to between one and five years' imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 CFA (\$170), compared with convicting 10 traffickers in 2020. Officials reported the court of appeal acquitted two traffickers sentenced to life and 15 years' of imprisonment in the previous reporting period. Additionally, regional MINAS authorities reported referral of 14 cases to the courts in the South Region in September 2021.

The government did not report any prosecutions or convictions of government officials complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action. Additionally, the government did not disclose efforts to investigate allegations of government security forces sexually exploiting women in the Southwest Region or soldiers from the 42nd Motorized Infantry Battalion who NGOs reported forcibly recruited community members in the Far North Region to stand watch against Boko Haram incursions during the previous reporting period. In June 2021, the Department of State suspended for five years the A-3 visa sponsorship privileges afforded to Cameroon bilateral mission members because the government declined to waive diplomatic immunity for U.S. criminal proceedings involving mistreatment of a domestic worker and has not initiated its own prosecution. Between 2017 and 2019, a Cameroonian diplomat posted in the United States engaged in alleged criminal violations related to human trafficking. Because of diplomatic immunity, the United States could not commence prosecution, and the Government of Cameroon declined to waive immunity to allow the case to proceed. The government did not report taking any action to hold the diplomat accountable for the second consecutive year. The diplomat left the United States in 2021. Additionally, between 2015 and 2017, a Cameroonian diplomat posted in the United States allegedly engaged in visa fraud related to a child domestic worker. Because of diplomatic immunity, the United States could not commence prosecution, nor did the government report taking any action for the fifth consecutive year to hold the diplomat accountable. The diplomat left the United States in 2018.

Ongoing insecurity in the Far North Region as well as armed violence in the Northwest and Southwest regions between the government and Anglophone separatists hindered the government's law enforcement efforts due to the closure of courts and lack of official access in some areas. In many instances, cases were settled outside of the court system to avoid lengthy and burdensome court proceedings. Over the course of the reporting period, the General Delegation for National Security reported conducting training on the Penal Code for 154 police officers, compared with no trainings in the previous reporting period.

PROTECTION

The government made mixed efforts to identify and protect victims. Although the government did not maintain comprehensive statistics, officials reported identifying 90 potential trafficking victims compared with 752 potential victims in 2020. The government did not report how many victims were referred to care. However, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) stated it provided assistance to an unknown number of trafficking victims during the reporting period, including shelter, basic assistance, psycho-social support, health care, as well reintegration services at five MINAS-run social centers in Yaounde and Douala; this compared with MINAS reporting assistance to all 752 victims identified in the previous reporting period. MINAS also offered livelihoods training for victims at the Betamba Childhood Institute in the country's Center Region. In January 2022, the government

opened a new short-term shelter for returning adult and child migrants, including trafficking victims. The government had SOPs to guide officials in proactive identification and referral of trafficking victims. However, the government did not report implementing or widely disseminating them to law enforcement or first responders.

The government had insufficient resources to address trafficking, which hindered the government's protection services. MINAS had the authority to admit children subjected to abuse—including trafficking victims—to government institutions for vulnerable children, which offered shelter, food, medical as well as psychological care, education, vocational training, and family tracing. Private centers funded by NGOs and regulated by MINAS provided care for an unknown number of child victims. One NGO reported it identified and provided services to five victims. The government launched an initiative to return children vulnerable to trafficking in urban centers to their families or place them in MINAS-run shelters; the government did not report how many children it assisted through this program. MINAS reported providing livelihoods and basic needs support to 21,098 IDPs and 39,518 children from IDP families vulnerable to trafficking. NGOs reported thousands of Cameroonian workers remained in Middle Eastern countries, many of whom were at risk of exploitation in domestic servitude or sex trafficking.

The government did not have a formal policy to provide protections to victims participating in investigations and prosecutions. The government did not report providing protection for any victims cooperating with trafficking investigations in spite of experts claiming trafficking networks threatened victims during their trials. Victims were entitled to restitution from convicted traffickers; however, the government did not report awarding restitution. Due to the limited use of the victim identification procedures and understanding of the crime among officials, authorities may have detained or deported some unidentified victims. The government could grant temporary residency status to foreign victims who, if deported, may face hardship or retribution; however, it did not report providing this accommodation during the reporting period.

PREVENTION

The government increased prevention efforts. The government's IMC convened regularly and extended the existing 2021-2022 NAP for two additional years. The IMC held three working sessions with local anti-trafficking NGOs to discuss recommendations for the NAP during the reporting period. MINAS continued its public awareness campaign directed toward the general public and vulnerable children to inform Cameroonians on trafficking indicators. The IMC organized awareness-raising activities in schools for students, teachers, and administrative staff. The government partnered with local NGOs and an international organization to organize three awareness raising activities in three cities focused on trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling in December 2021. In preparation for the January 2022 African Cup of Nations, MINAS organized a workshop in October 2021 to train law enforcement officials, social workers, and local representatives on human trafficking. The Minister of Social Affairs, in collaboration with an international organization, launched a dedicated human trafficking hotline on January 18, 2022. The Cameroon Human Rights Commission also operated a hotline to report human rights violations, including human trafficking. The government did not report whether any victims were identified from the hotlines during the reporting period.

NGOs stated police and immigration officials' screening efforts at Douala's international airport prevented some potential victims from traveling to the Middle East as a result of human trafficking schemes. The Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP) reported auditing sixty companies and private labor placement offices compared with none during the previous year, which led to the suspension and closure of companies that were not adhering to the new regulations in April 2021. Decree No. ° 2021/2124/PM of April 14, 2021, established minimum operating requirements to establish a temporary job placement agency. Officials denied the accreditation of 10 labor recruitment firms for violations potentially related to trafficking, issued warnings to 16 temporary employment placement firms suspected of human trafficking; and suspended nine firms for trafficking-related concerns. MINEFOP officials reported publishing a list of licensed recruitment agencies annually, although the scope of dissemination was limited. MINEFOP reported it did not have a system to prevent traffickers from exploiting workers once agencies placed them in overseas employment. Increasing their vulnerability to trafficking, Cameroonians frequently used unauthorized recruiters to seek employment abroad.

The lack of birth certificates remained a factor increasing the vulnerability of individuals to exploitation. The government estimated at least 1.6 million children enrolled in schools in 2019 did not have birth certificates. An NGO attributed the lack of birth certificates to internal and external problems faced by the government such as poor record keeping, staff shortages, and violence and insecurity in the Northwest and Southwest regions. The government reported providing anti-trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers. The government did not report providing anti-trafficking training to its diplomatic personnel. The government made efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Cameroon, and traffickers exploit victims from Cameroon abroad. Pandemic-related border closures likely reduced the scale of transnational exploitation, according to experts. However, the economic impacts of the pandemic, combined with ongoing violence in the Northwest and Southwest regions, contributed to a sharp increase in the number of victims exploited domestically. According to the government study conducted during the reporting period, traffickers are using the Gulf of Guinea to move Cameroonian children to Côte d'Ivoire for exploitation in cocoa farming and Malian, Burkinabe, Beninese, or Togolese children to Cameroon for exploitation in farming in the North, West, and Northwest regions of Cameroon. High unemployment rates and economic uncertainty continued to drive many, especially women, to contemplate economic migration under questionable circumstances, leaving them vulnerable to traffickers. Government officials, NGO representatives, and media outlets stated the insecurity in some regions increased the risk of human trafficking during the reporting period due to the more than one million IDPs, diminished police and judicial presence, as well as deteriorated economic and educational conditions. The four years of intermittent school closures in the Northwest and Southwest regions have resulted in some parents sending their children to stay with intermediaries who instead of providing education and safety, exploit the children in domestic servitude.

Child traffickers often use the promise of education or a better life in urban areas to convince rural parents to entrust their children to intermediaries, who then exploit the children in sex trafficking or forced labor; parents may play an active role early in the process due to their desire to remove their children from areas impacted by violence. Criminals coerce women, IDPs, children experiencing homelessness, and orphans into sex trafficking and forced labor throughout the country. Some labor recruiters lure children and adolescents from economically disadvantaged families to cities with the prospect of employment and then subject victims to labor or sex trafficking. Traffickers exploit Cameroonian children in domestic service, restaurants, as well as begging or vending on streets and highways. Additionally, criminal elements force Cameroonian children to work in artisanal gold mining, gravel quarries, fishing, animal breeding, and agriculture (on onion, cotton, tea, and cocoa plantations), as well as in urban transportation assisting bus drivers and in construction to run errands, work, or provide security. A government study highlighted Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and the maritime Gulf of Guinea area are the main channels through which traffickers move children intended for exploitation in domestic servitude in Gabon. Media reporting indicates exploitation in Cameroon's fishing sector is widespread.

Observers note pandemic travel restrictions likely decreased child sex tourism in 2020; past reports highlighted Kribi and Douala as two centers of the crime, primarily perpetrated by nationals of Belgium, Chad, France, Germany, Nigeria, Switzerland, and Uganda. Criminals exploited Cameroonians in forced labor and sex trafficking in the Bonaberi neighborhood in Douala—which hosts hundreds of IDPs, according to NGOs.

Foreign business owners and herders force children from neighboring countries including Benin, the Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria to labor in spare parts shops or cattle grazing in northern Cameroon; many traffickers share the nationality of their victims. The number of children traffickers exploit as they transit the country en route to Gabon and Equatorial Guinea decreased due to border closures related to the pandemic. Observers reported officials from the Republic of Turkey and the People's Republic of China in Cameroon may unwittingly facilitate transnational human trafficking by granting visas to Africans with little oversight. Cameroonian banks may have assisted criminal networks involved in fraudulent recruitment by validating income and employment oversight requirements, as well as opening “ghost” bank accounts for victims to demonstrate false income levels.

Observers reported there were 933,000 IDPs in Cameroon at the end of 2021, a decrease from 977,000 reported in 2019. In addition to IDPs, there were approximately 476,000 refugees in the country as of December 31, 2021. Traffickers may prey on both IDPs and refugees due to their economic instability and sometimes-limited access to formal justice. Boko Haram's activities on the border with Nigeria continued to displace many of these refugees. There continued to be reports of hereditary slavery in northern chiefdoms.

Observers previously reported government security forces engaged in commercial sex with women in the Southwest Region divisions of Ndian, Buea, Ekona, and Muyuka, using food insecurity and their authority as leverage. Some community neighborhood watch groups, known as vigilance committees, may also use and recruit children in operations against Boko Haram and other non-state armed groups, although there is no evidence to suggest the government was providing material support to these specific groups. Anglophone separatists recruited and used child soldiers in the Southwest and Northwest regions, both for fighting government forces and for gathering intelligence, according to observers.

Traffickers exploit Cameroonians from disadvantaged social strata, in particular from rural areas, in forced labor and sex trafficking in the Middle East (especially Kuwait and Lebanon), Europe (including Switzerland and Cyprus) multiple African countries (including Benin and Nigeria), the United States, and Thailand. Most Cameroonians exploited abroad are between the ages of 20 and 38, and come from the Northwest, Southwest, Littoral, Center, South, and West regions. Fraudulent labor brokers recruit some Cameroonian women for domestic work in the Middle East, where traffickers exploit them in sex trafficking or domestic servitude. Pandemic border closures diminished, but did not eliminate, the risk that criminals exploit some economic migrants in search of opportunity in Libya, or while in transit through Niger. NGOs reported Nigerians in the eastern states of that country exploited Cameroonian refugees displaced by the crisis in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions in forced labor and sex trafficking.

Trafficking networks generally consist of local community members, including religious leaders and trafficking victims who have become perpetrators. These networks advertise jobs through the internet, as well as other media, and recruit and sell other Cameroonians directly to families in need of domestic workers. Traffickers used the internet to recruit victims through fake websites, highlighting opportunities in trades such as the fashion industry, modeling, entertainment, education, and information technology. Advocates working on trafficking issues report the government's awareness-raising activities targeting fraudulent recruitment have raised awareness among vulnerable populations, but have caused intermediaries to operate with greater discretion, often directing victims to travel to the Middle East through neighboring countries, including Nigeria. International organizations, NGOs, and migrants report Cameroonian trafficking networks in Morocco coerce women into sex trafficking.

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