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Human Rights in Africa: Review of 2019 - Cameroon [AFR 01/1352/2020]

Armed groups and security forces continued to commit human rights abuses and violations in the context of the Anglophone crisis and the fight against Boko Haram in the Far North. The number of internally displaced people rose and hundreds of thousands of children were prevented from going to school. The authorities repressed dissent.

Background

Cameroon faced three major crisis which caused numerous violations and abuses of human rights. In the English-speaking regions of North-West and South-West, separatists armed groups, who emerged after the repression of peaceful protests against allegations of discrimination in 2016, and security forces, continued to commit serious human rights violations and abuses. From 30 September to 4 October, the authorities organized a “major national dialogue”, which aimed at addressing the root causes of the crisis and finding solutions to peace and reconciliation. In the Far North region, civilians were victims of a surge in attacks by armed groups related to Boko Haram. In Yaoundé and other main cities, peaceful protests held by political activists to contest alleged irregularities in the 2018 electoral process that led to the reelection of President Biya for a 7th term, were severely repressed.

Abuses by armed groups

North-west and south-west regions

Separatist armed groups continued to kill security forces and to commit serious abuses against the population. They were responsible for unlawful killings, often involving mutilations. They targeted civil servants, ordinary people who failed to respect “ghost town” and instructions to close schools and relatives of members of defense and security forces. In September, a video was posted on social media showing hooded men beheading a woman who worked as a wardress at the Bamenda Central Prison. They were also responsible for numerous abductions of students, journalists and humanitarian workers. In February, the president of the Cameroon Association of English Speaking Journalists was abducted by separatist fighters in the city of Bamenda after he criticized their call for families not to send their children to school. In September, a local radio in Buea (South-West) was attacked and the radio presenter, Mary Namondo, was abducted. In October, armed groups also abducted ten workers of two UN implementing partners in Tubah subdivision, all were later released.

Far north region

Positive developments in recent years have been called into question by a surge in attacks by armed groups related to Boko Haram in the Far North region. Between January and November, 275 people were killed during attacks, according to data collected by Amnesty International. Out of the total number, 225 were civilians. The canton of Tourou, which includes 16 villages, suffered at least sixteen incursions during which six people were killed and several people kidnapped. In Mayo-Tsanaga and Mayo-Sava, attacks most often took the form of deadly raids involving killings, abductions, mutilations and lootings. Members of vigilance committees and the elderly or people living with disabilities, were often among the victims. These abuses may constitute war crimes.

Violations by security forces

The military committed extrajudicial executions and house destructions during their operations in North-West and South-West, as reported by the UN and international and local NGOs. On 31 October, the president of the United States of America terminated the designation of Cameroon as a beneficiary under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), considering that Cameroon failed to address concerns regarding persistent human rights violations being committed by security forces. Traditional authorities accused the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) of having forcefully entered the Royal Palace in Bafut (North-West), wounding people and looting the place on 24 September. According to the UN, burning of houses predominantly associated with Cameroon military represented 35.5% of the 1,790 protection incidents registered in October.

Justice

On 20 August, self-proclaimed president of "Ambazonia" Julius Ayuk Tabe and nine of his followers were sentenced by a Yaoundé military court to life imprisonment on charges of terrorism and secession. They had previously been arrested in Nigeria and sent back to Cameroon on 26 January 2018. A ruling by the Federal High Court of Abuja (Nigeria) stated in March 2019 that these expulsions were illegal and unconstitutional.

On 3 October, an official statement from president Paul Biya informed that he ordered the discontinuance of proceedings pending before military tribunals against 333 persons arrested and detained in the context of the crisis in the North-West and South-West regions.

The Yaoundé military court decided in December that the trial of seven soldiers caught on video carrying out the killings of two women and two children in Far North Cameroon would be held in close doors. Their arrest came on after Amnesty International experts analyzed the video in July 2018 and shown evidence strongly suggesting the extrajudicial executions were perpetrated by Cameroonian soldiers.

Freedoms of expression and assembly

Cameroonian authorities blatantly violated the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, in particular to stop and violently disrupt any protest against the reelection of President Paul Biya.

In January, nearly 300 protesters were arbitrarily arrested during peaceful demonstrations, among whom the opposition leader Maurice Kamto, head of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (*Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun, MRC*), who claimed victory at the presidential election of October 2018. In February, Maurice Kamto and other members of the MRC were charged by a military court for hostility against the homeland, incitement to insurrection, offense against the president of the republic, destruction of public buildings and goods. On 1 and 8 June, more than 200 people who were demonstrating in different cities, like in Douala, to protest alleged electoral irregularities, were arbitrarily arrested.

On 4 October, an official press release informed that Paul Biya ordered *the discontinuance of proceedings pending before military tribunals against some officials and militants of political parties, in particular of the MRC. On 5 October, Maurice Kamto and 102 other persons were released.*

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment against detainees were reported. At least 59 supporters of the MRC - including six women - were subjected to severe beatings during their questioning at the Secrétariat d'Etat à la défense (SED). Before releasing them, security forces beat them with sticks and forced them into humiliating positions. The 59 opposition members were arrested on 1 June 2019 during a planned peaceful protest in the capital Yaoundé. They were brought to the SED for questioning about the protest, tortured and arbitrarily detained by security forces, who also warned them against participating in another protest scheduled a week later.

Rights to health and education

The crisis in North-West and South-West led to the destruction of healthcare facilities, impacting the ability of people to access health care. On 30 October, during fights between military men and armed groups, the Integrated Health Facility in Tole (South-West) was burnt down. In December, health actors recorded three attacks on healthcare facilities in Ekondo-Titi (South-West), Idenau (South-West) and BuaBua (North-West). As of December, 17 % of schools were functional and 29% of teachers were able to work, according to the UN.

Internally displaced people

As of 31 December 2019, around 700,000 people were internally displaced in North-West and South-West regions. In the Far North region, the number of displaced people (more than 270,000) increased in all departments due to the upsurge in attacks on inhabitants by armed groups related to Boko Haram. In the second half of the year, around 50 localities were still deserted.

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Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

[T \(Telefon\)](#) +43 1 589 00 583

[F \(Fax\)](#) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

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