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Trafficking in Persons Report 2018 - Country Narratives - Cameroon

CAMEROON: Tier 2

The Government of Cameroon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period; therefore Cameroon was upgraded to Tier 2. The government demonstrated increasing efforts by raising the number of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of suspected traffickers; training law enforcement, judicial officials, and civil society actors on trafficking provisions in the revised penal code; increasing direct services to potential trafficking victims from Cameroon and other African countries; enhancing screening procedures at primary airports; and re-invigorating the inter-ministerial committee. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not fully disseminate its victim identification and national referral system (NRS) and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to all law enforcement or first responders, nor did it pass draft anti-trafficking legislation from 2012 that conforms to international law.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAMEROON

Train law enforcement and NGO personnel on the NRS and SOPs on victim identification and referral to increase the ability of first responders to identify internal trafficking cases as well as movement-based forms of the crime; increase efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers for all forms of trafficking—including complicit officials and cases referred by NGOs—under the “slavery in persons” provision of the penal code; increase repatriation assistance, including *laissez-passer* cards, to Cameroonian trafficking victims identified abroad; increase formal collaboration with NGOs on identifying and protecting victims and raising awareness of trafficking; provide training on trafficking investigations to the inter-ministerial anti-trafficking committee, and regularly convene the group; pass draft anti-trafficking legislation from 2012 that conforms to international law; amend the penal code to make a clear distinction between trafficking and smuggling; expand training for law enforcement, judiciary personnel, and social workers on the anti-trafficking section of the penal code and victim-centered investigations; publicize information to citizens on their rights as foreign workers and sources of assistance while abroad; investigate labor recruiters and agencies suspected of fraudulent recruitment—including unlicensed recruiters and

intermediaries—and prosecute if complicit in trafficking; raise awareness of registered recruitment agencies to citizens; and develop a system to track trafficking cases and publicize relevant law enforcement and victim protection statistics.

PROSECUTION

The government increased its anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law criminalized all forms of labor trafficking and some forms of sex trafficking. Inconsistent with international legal standards, the law required a demonstration of threat, fraud, deception, force, or other forms of coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offense, 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 CFA francs (CFA) (\$88 to \$1,760) for all forms of trafficking, which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. If the offense involved a victim who was 15 years old or younger, the penalties increased to 15 to 20 years imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 to 10 million CFA (\$180 to \$17,610). The penalties for debt bondage ranged from five to 10 years imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 to 500,000 CFA (\$18 to \$880) 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 smuggling offenses by referring to trafficking in persons offenses, as defined under international law, as “slavery in persons,” while referring to smuggling-related offenses as “trafficking in persons.” Legislation drafted in 2012 to address victim and witness protection and correct inconsistencies with international law remained pending for the sixth consecutive year.

The Delegate General of National Security (DGSN) reported investigating 89 potential sex and labor trafficking cases during the reporting period that resulted in the prosecutions of 112 suspected traffickers under penal code article 342. Because article 342 prohibited both “trafficking in persons” and “slavery in persons,” the 112 suspects may have included smugglers. The suspects were from all 10 regions of Cameroon and were either friends or family members of the potential victims. Although most of the reported cases involved alleged labor trafficking, at least five cases included suspected sex trafficking crimes. In addition to the 112 prosecutions stemming from DGSN investigations, the Ministry of Justice reported prosecuting 17 suspected traffickers, and convicting five traffickers during the reporting period, with four of those cases being tried under article 342 and one tried under charges of fraud. These efforts compared to 13 investigations, 13 prosecutions, and two convictions during the previous reporting period. The judiciary was reportedly investigating one government official for trafficking offenses that occurred over previous years.

Lawyer strikes in the Northwest and Southwest regions severely delayed court proceedings in Buea and Bamenda, where most of the trafficking cases were referred, which exacerbated judicial inefficiencies. In part because of insufficient—but

improving—cooperation between the government and NGOs, and a weak judicial administration, some regional courts and NGOs encouraged victims to settle trafficking cases outside of court.

The government reported the Ministry of Justice, the DGSN, and Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) had each organized efforts to educate judges, law enforcement, and social workers on the provisions relevant to trafficking included in the revised penal code, although exact numbers of officials trained were unknown. In spite of these training efforts, some trafficking offenses may have been tried as child abuse or kidnapping, which carried lesser penalties.

PROTECTION

The government increased efforts to identify and protect victims, but did not provide comprehensive nation-wide statistics on the number of trafficking victims identified, referred, and assisted. The government reported identifying 104 potential victims through the course of law enforcement investigations, and identified and referred 32 probable child trafficking victims in Yaounde to the government-sponsored Centre d'Ecoute, where they received psycho-social services and other care. In 2017, MINAS reported identifying over 1,100 street children in urban centers throughout Cameroon who were highly vulnerable to trafficking; reunited 142 of those children with their families, placed 23 in government-sponsored care facilities, provided 40 with vocational training, and assisted 19 in resuming formal education. During 2016, the government reported identifying and providing services to 153 potential victims, although 42 of those were likely kidnapping victims. The Ministry of Health and MINAS partnered with international organizations to repatriate more than 559 Cameroonians from Libya and Niger, including potential trafficking victims. The government provided temporary shelter, medical care, and counseling to assist these individuals upon their arrival, in partnership with international organizations.

NGOs reported thousands of Cameroonian workers remained in Middle Eastern countries, and that many of these workers were victims of domestic servitude or sex trafficking. In 2017, the Cameroonian embassy in Saudi Arabia coordinated with the Ghanaian embassy in Kuwait to issue return travel documents to Cameroonian trafficking victims in Kuwait in March 2018. The victims have since been repatriated. During the reporting period, the government repatriated three trafficking victims who had been held in Kuwait's detention center and one victim from Saudi Arabia.

While the government had a NRS and SOPs to guide government officials in proactive identification and referral of victims of trafficking, implementation was limited and many officials had yet to be trained on the measures. MINAS had the authority to admit child trafficking victims to government institutions for vulnerable children, which offered shelter, food, medical and psychological care, education, vocational training, and family tracing. However, the government did not report referring victims to these facilities during the reporting period. Private centers funded by NGOs and regulated by

MINAS provided care for an unknown number of child victims. Trafficking-specific services were not available for adult or child victims, but minors did receive services along with other vulnerable children.

The government did not have a formal policy to encourage victims to participate in investigations or prosecutions of their traffickers and did not report providing counseling, legal support, or any other assistance to victims who testified during court proceedings. NGOs reported the case of one victim who had to pay to travel long distances each time their suspected trafficker appeared at trial; the government gave no assistance or protection to the victim in spite of multiple adjournments, and threats made against her by the suspected trafficker’s relatives. While there were no reports the government detained, fined, or jailed any trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a result of being subjected to trafficking, some victims may have remained unidentified in the law enforcement system due to the limited use of the NRS and SOPs. The government could grant temporary residency status to foreign victims who, if deported, may face hardship or retribution; however, it did not report use of this accommodation during the reporting period. MINAS, through its Reception and Observation Center in Douala Bepanda, continued to provide services during this reporting period to two foreign trafficking victims identified in previous reporting periods.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts. A lack of coordination and funding impeded implementation of the 2017-2019 anti-trafficking national action plan. The anti-trafficking inter-ministerial committee held five meetings, compared with zero during the previous reporting period, and increased collaboration with NGOs and civil society representatives during those sessions. The government organized two press events to raise awareness of the risks of fraudulent recruitment to the Middle East that reached an unknown number of Cameroonians. Although the government did not provide specific funding to implement the national action plan, some of the activities under the action plan were included in the budgets of individual ministries. The government increased its engagement with NGOs and civil society, including through its inter-ministerial committee to combat trafficking, which was a key component of its national action plan.

MINAS and the police conducted a campaign in the summer of 2017 aimed at sensitizing parents of the risk of child labor (including trafficking) and warning of potential punishment for complicit parents. To reduce the number of Cameroonian women exploited in destination countries in the Middle East, the government enhanced screening procedures at its airports, requiring proof of valid contracts in some cases. Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP) officials reported vulnerable individuals used unauthorized recruiters to seek employment abroad, but the government did not investigate those suspicious recruitment practices. The government reported that MINEFOP, in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, monitored formal labor recruiters and revoked the licenses of an unknown number of

fraudulent labor recruitment firms. The government reported it was actively negotiating with the governments of Lebanon and Qatar to finalize anti-trafficking memorandums of understanding, initiated during the previous reporting period by the Ministry of External Relations. NGOs reported the government maintained its travel ban for women traveling to the Middle East from Douala Airport. While this may have prevented some cases of trafficking, to circumvent the ban, migrant workers were reported to have traveled through Nigeria en route to the Middle East, thus increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. In partnership with an international organization, the government provided briefings on international humanitarian law, which included a trafficking component, to members of the Cameroonian armed forces prior to their deployments abroad.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, Cameroon is a source, transit, and destination country for women and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking and a source country for men in forced labor. Child traffickers often use the promise of education or a better life in the city to convince rural parents to give their children over to an intermediary, who then exploits the children in sex trafficking or forced labor. Sometimes relatives subject children to sex trafficking within the country. Homeless children and orphans are especially vulnerable to trafficking. Teenagers and adolescents from economically disadvantaged families are often lured to cities by the prospect of employment but are subjected to labor or sex trafficking. Cameroonian children are exploited in domestic service, restaurants, begging or vending on streets and highways, 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 as errand boys, laborers, or night watchmen. Children from neighboring countries are exploited in spare parts shops or by herders in northern Cameroon and transit the country en route to Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.

An international organization reported Cameroon currently has over 665,000 individuals of concern as of February 2018—including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—who are vulnerable to trafficking due to their economic instability and lack of access to formal justice. There continued to be reports of hereditary servitude imposed on former slaves in some chiefdoms in the North region. Boko Haram’s activities on the border with Nigeria and instability in neighboring CAR has contributed to the displacement of many of these refugees and IDPs. CAR refugee children are forced to engage in artisanal gold mining and sex trafficking in some areas of the East and Adamawa regions. An NGO alleged that in 2016 some officially sanctioned community watch groups (vigilance committees) may have used and recruited children as young as 12 years old. Boko Haram is a consistent terrorist threat, and continues forcibly to recruit Cameroonian children as porters, cooks, and scouts. Boko Haram also uses women and girls as forced suicide bombers and sex slaves; and boys as child soldiers.

Cameroonians from disadvantaged social strata, in particular from rural areas, are exploited in forced labor and sex trafficking in the Middle East (especially Kuwait and Lebanon), as well as in Europe (including Switzerland and Cyprus), the United States, and multiple African countries (including Nigeria). Most exploited Cameroonians abroad are between the ages of 20 and 38, and come from the Northwest, Southwest, Littoral, Center, South, and West Regions. Some Cameroonian women are recruited by fraudulent labor brokers for domestic work in the Middle East but fall victim to sex trafficking or domestic servitude upon arrival. Some economic migrants in search of opportunity became victims of trafficking in Libya, or while in transit through Niger. Trafficking networks commonly consist of local community members, including religious leaders and former trafficking victims who have transitioned to perpetrators. These networks advertise jobs through the internet and other media, and recruit and sell other Cameroonians directly to families in need of domestic servants. Advocates working in the field report local 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 force women into prostitution.

ecoi.net summary:

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