



Document #2130546

USDOS – US Department of State (Author)

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cameroon

CAMEROON (Tier 2)

The Government of Cameroon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore, Cameroon remained on Tier 2. These efforts included identifying more trafficking victims and launching a child protection information management system to strengthen protection of vulnerable children from abuse, including trafficking victims. The government initiated draft legislation to reduce vulnerabilities to forced labor in fishing and trained law enforcement officials on combating cybercrimes, including trafficking. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government investigated fewer reported trafficking crimes and did not convict any traffickers, while prosecutions remained on par with the previous reporting period. Protection services for victims remained limited. The government did not amend its anti-trafficking law to remove the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion for child sex trafficking and to clearly distinguish between trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling crimes. Concerns of official complicity in trafficking crimes remained.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Vigorously investigate alleged trafficking crimes and prosecute perpetrators, including complicit officials, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms.
- 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 human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

- Using the SOPs for victim identification and referral to care, proactively identify and refer trafficking victims to services by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, and train officials on their use.
- Increase the availability of protection services for all trafficking victims, including by partnering with civil society service providers.
- Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.
- Adopt and implement the updated NAP and allocate resources for its implementation.
- Continue to train law enforcement officers on the indicators of trafficking, victim-centered and trauma-informed trafficking investigations, the difference between human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and computer forensics to investigate online exploitation.
- Implement a systemic victim-witness assistance program to increase protective services for victims participating in the criminal justice process and prevent re-traumatization.
- Increase funding allocated for anti-trafficking activities, including inter-ministerial committee (IMC) operations.
- Continue to develop a robust and comprehensive data collection system, disaggregating between sex and labor trafficking cases to capture government-wide anti-trafficking efforts.
- Increase efforts to issue national identity documents to citizens to reduce their vulnerability to trafficking.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained 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 continued to require 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 one million Central African francs (CFA) (\$79 to \$1,586), which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to some forms of sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave 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 in prison and a fine of 100,000 to 10 million CFA (\$159 to \$15,859). 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 (\$16 to \$793) 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; it referred to trafficking in persons crimes, as defined under international law, as “slavery in persons,” while migrant smuggling-related offenses as “trafficking in persons.” Increasing the potential for conflating migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons, Article 342-1 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.

The government investigated 146 cases (47 sex trafficking, 92 labor trafficking, and seven for unspecified forms of trafficking). This compared with 392 cases investigated in 2023. The government reported initiating prosecutions of eight alleged traffickers and continued two ongoing prosecutions from previous reporting periods. This compared with prosecuting nine alleged traffickers in 2023. Courts did not convict any traffickers, compared with four convictions in 2023. Media reports indicated the government prosecuted two Chinese-nationals charged with trafficking for allegedly exploiting Vietnamese victims in sex trafficking. In one investigation, local officials in Ngaoundere reported a cybercrime scheme where suspected traffickers lured individuals with job opportunities and then subjected victims to deplorable labor conditions.

The national police and the gendarmerie were responsible for investigating trafficking crimes; the government did not have a dedicated unit responsible for investigating trafficking crimes. Officials reported allocating funding to a special unit to investigate online criminal activity, including human trafficking. In partnership with an international organization, the government continued to operate “child desks,” staffed by police to respond to trafficking and related crimes involving children, in local police stations in the Northwest and Southwest regions. Some police and gendarmerie stations also had designated desks to address violence against women and girls, including trafficking. However, observers reported some police units lacked basic training and sufficient resources. Authorities continued to report ongoing insecurity in the Far North Region, as well as violent conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions, impeded law enforcement’s ability to comprehensively investigate trafficking crimes. Limited resources hindered law enforcement’s ability to provide trained advocates to support victim witnesses during investigations. Officials continued to report some potential cases did not move forward to prosecution because victims chose not to participate in court proceedings due to the lack of available victim-witness assistance and fear of reprisal. Due to the lack of protections and the protracted nature of criminal justice proceedings, some victims chose to settle potential trafficking cases outside the formal court system. Additionally, funding and resources for law enforcement officials, including training on victim identification, remained insufficient.

The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action. The government did not report taking any actions to hold its diplomats accountable for alleged complicity in crimes related to trafficking. Although not explicitly reported as human trafficking, an international organization reported allegations of sexual exploitation with trafficking indicators were made against Cameroonian peacekeepers.

The government, including in partnership with a foreign government, trained police officers and magistrates on combating cybercrime, including online trafficking crimes. The government trained military and gendarmerie officers, social workers, and civil society organizations on anti-trafficking legal frameworks and identification and referral to care of victims. The government participated in Operation Libertas II, an international law enforcement operation led by INTERPOL and the African Union Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL) to investigate trafficking crimes. Media sources reported law enforcement officials collaborated with the Government of Nigeria to conduct a cross-border anti-trafficking operation that resulted in the arrest of at least 20 suspected traffickers and the identification of at least 100 potential victims in Nigeria.

PROTECTION

The government increased victim protection efforts.

The government reported identifying seven trafficking victims (one victim of sex trafficking and six victims of labor trafficking) and identified 737 potential victims. This compared with zero trafficking victims identified in 2023. The government did not report how many victims it referred to services or assisted. The government continued to implement its victim identification and referral SOPs, but it did not report whether the SOPs were consistently used. The government continued to proactively screen vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators and maintained anti-trafficking units at Yaoundé and Douala's international airports. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) launched the Child Protection Information Management System to strengthen the protection of vulnerable children from abuse, including trafficking, by harmonizing government procedures and improving data collection. In September 2024, the government signed a memorandum of understanding with an international organization to strengthen protection and provide social services for 112,155 internally displaced persons (IDP), including potential trafficking victims.

The government continued to maintain seven MINAS-run centers for victims of crime, including children, with the capacity to provide assistance

to trafficking victims, including shelter, basic needs, psycho-social support, health care, and family reunification assistance. Of the seven centers, three are dedicated to assist vulnerable children in Betamba, Maroua, and Bertoua. The government did not report how much funding it allocated for victim care. 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. The government continued to provide subsidies to MINAS-partnered organizations that provided temporary shelter, psycho-social counseling, and medical services to trafficking survivors. Despite these available services, the government did not report on their use by victims and continued to lack sufficient resources to adequately protect trafficking victims. Media sources reported the government assisted in repatriating some Cameroonian victims exploited in Lebanon but did not assist Cameroonian victims seeking repatriation assistance from Nigeria. Due to inconsistent screening, including among women removed from or allegedly associated with separatist fighters, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. The government, in partnership with an international organization, formalized a protocol for the transfer and care of children associated with armed groups to protection actors. The government also adopted a roadmap to implement educational, mental health, and psychosocial services for these children and offer vocational training opportunities.

The government did not have a formal policy to provide victim-witness assistance to victims participating in investigations and prosecutions, and did not provide victim-witness assistance to any victims cooperating in investigations or prosecutions, despite reports indicating traffickers often threatened victims during trials. Victims could obtain restitution from convicted traffickers through criminal proceedings or seek damages through civil suits. The government could grant temporary residency status to foreign victims; however, it did not report providing this accommodation.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts.

The IMC continued to lead the government's anti-trafficking efforts and convened six times during the reporting period. The government had a 2021-2024 NAP. The government finalized an updated NAP, but it remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ), in partnership with an international organization, held a workshop with key stakeholders to discuss challenges in combatting trafficking in persons, including victim identification and referral to

services. MOJ and other government staff also participated in a local NGO's anti-trafficking workshop that, among other things, addressed the legal distinction between trafficking and migration. The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC) established a designated focal point to collect information on human trafficking and illegal immigration. The CHRC organized awareness-raising activities for civil society organizations, schools, and traditional and religious leaders. In partnership with an international organization and NGOs, the government conducted campaigns to raise awareness of human trafficking and migrant smuggling and on the dangers of child labor in the mining and cocoa sectors. Authorities advertised this anti-trafficking campaign at airports and transportation hubs in Yaoundé and Douala and supplemented it with radio ads in limited local languages. MINAS continued to operate a trafficking-specific hotline; the government did not report identification or referral to law enforcement of any victims following hotline calls. The CHRC and gendarmerie also operated hotlines to report human rights violations and abuses, including human trafficking.

In partnership with an international organization, the government trained security forces on issues related to children and armed conflict and reporting procedures to prevent the recruitment or use of child soldiers. The government did not effectively regulate foreign labor recruiters or report taking measures to hold fraudulent labor recruiters accountable. The government did not report auditing any companies or private labor placement offices but took steps to draft regulatory procedures to monitor labor recruitment agencies. The government initiated negotiations to establish or renew bilateral labor agreements with several countries, including France, Belgium, and Saudi Arabia to enhance protections for Cameroonian workers abroad. Researchers reported the opening of additional Cameroonian consulates abroad in recent years, particularly in Gulf states, significantly enhanced the government's anti-trafficking efforts. The government adopted legislation to prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing practices, including forced labor, across the seafood supply chain. The government continued to conduct labor inspections, particularly in the mining sector; however, the government did not report identifying any trafficking victims or investigating any potential violations from these inspections. The government began drafting a national report on child labor; launched a study on child labor in the cocoa sector; and took steps to finalize legislation listing hazardous work prohibited for children, including in mines, factories, and farms.

The lack of birth certificates continued to increase the vulnerability of individuals to trafficking. The government estimated at least 1.5 million children enrolled in schools 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 the violence and insecurity in the Northwest and Southwest regions.

The government reported conducting three months of training, including anti-trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers. The government reported providing anti-trafficking training to its diplomatic personnel. Observers reported the government hosted an informational session for diplomatic and consular missions in Cameroon on the legal framework governing foreign workers, including the anti-trafficking law. The government made some efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, including criminalizing elements such as soliciting.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking as reported over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Cameroon, and traffickers exploit victims from Cameroon abroad. According to a 2022 government study, traffickers use the Gulf of Guinea to transport Cameroonian children to Côte d'Ivoire and exploit them in labor trafficking in cocoa farming. Traffickers also bring Malian, Burkinabe, Beninese, or Togolese children to Cameroon via the Gulf of Guinea and exploit them in labor trafficking on farms in the North, West, and Northwest regions of Cameroon and in domestic servitude. Government officials, NGO representatives, and media outlets report more than one million IDPs face an increased risk of human trafficking due to insecurity in some regions, a diminished police and judicial presence, and deteriorated economic and educational conditions.

Observers report vulnerable populations such as orphans, persons with disabilities, women and girls, and members of the vulnerable Mbororo community in Bali Nyonga, Northwest Region, are at risk of targeted violence and trafficking. Observers report Cameroonian children and Chinese nationals in Chinese-national owned artisanal gold mines are vulnerable to labor trafficking. Observers allege Chinese-national owned gold mining companies and foreign-operated timber companies exploit individuals from the Central African Republic in forced labor. Foreign business owners exploit Cameroonian girls in sex trafficking. Some labor recruiters lure children from economically disadvantaged families to cities with the prospect of employment and then exploit victims in sex or labor trafficking. Traffickers exploit children in labor trafficking in domestic service, agriculture (onion, cotton, tea, palm oil, and cocoa plantations), restaurants, street vending, sand extraction from rivers, and forced begging. Media reporting indicates there is labor trafficking in Cameroon's fishing sector.

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. International organizations reported there were

2,123,229 IDPs and 658,544 IDP returnees in Cameroon as of January 2025, an increase from 1,036,774 IDPs reported in 2024. There were approximately 427,916 refugees and asylum seekers in the country as of January 2025. There continue to be reports of hereditary slavery in some northern chiefdoms.

Experts reported the deteriorating security situation in the Southwest regions have led to unprecedented levels of sexual violence against women and girls, including sex trafficking. Cameroonian security forces previously used children younger than the age of 15 in support roles; however, no new reports have emerged since the CHRC carried out an investigation and sent letters in February 2024 to the Minister Delegate in charge of Defense and the Delegate General for National Security asking them to take the necessary measures to put an end to these practices. Observers report Boko Haram continues to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers, including girls, in its attacks on civilian and military targets in the northern part of the country. Separatists in the Northwest and Southwest regions recruit and use child soldiers in combat roles and to gather intelligence, according to observers. Observers report Russian authorities recruit and use Cameroonian undocumented migrants in Russia in combat and support roles in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Traffickers exploit Cameroonians from disadvantaged social strata, particularly those from rural areas, in sex and labor trafficking in the Middle East (especially Kuwait and Lebanon), Thailand, Europe (including Switzerland and Cyprus), the United States, and other African countries (including Benin and Nigeria). Traffickers may exploit children in forced criminality, including in the production, distribution, and transportation of drugs across borders. Most Cameroonians exploited abroad are between the ages of 20 and 38 and come from the Northwest, Southwest, Littoral, Center, South, and West regions. Severe drought and flooding drives vulnerable populations to relocate to urban areas where they face economic hardship and increased vulnerabilities to trafficking. Fraudulent labor brokers recruit some Cameroonian women for domestic work in the Middle East, where traffickers exploit them in sex trafficking or domestic servitude.

Trafficking networks generally include local community members, including religious leaders and some trafficking victims who have become the 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 increasingly use social media and platforms, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Qnet, to recruit victims through fake websites, highlighting opportunities in the fashion industry, modeling, entertainment, education, and technology. Cameroonians are especially vulnerable to online forms of exploitation in Benin, Ghana, and Burkina Faso. Observers report Cameroonian trafficking networks in Morocco coerce some women into sex trafficking.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on trafficking in persons (covering April 2024 to March 2025)

Country:

Cameroon

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) (Author)

Published:

29 September 2025

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-trafficking-in-persons-report-33/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

30 September 2025

Document ID:

2130546

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(ACCORD)		

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

