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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ANNOUNCEMENT: The Department of State will release an addendum to this report in mid 2021 that expands the subsection on Women in Section 6 to include a broader range of issues related to reproductive rights.

Cameroon is a republic dominated by a strong presidency. The president retains power over the legislative and judicial branches of government. The ruling political party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement, has remained in power since its creation in 1985. The country held legislative elections on February 9, which were marked by irregularities. The ruling party won 152 of 180 National Assembly seats. Paul Biya has served as president since 1982. He was last reelected in 2018 in an election marked with irregularities.

The national police and the national gendarmerie are responsible for internal security. The former reports to the General Delegation of National Security and the latter to the Secretariat of State for Defense in charge of the Gendarmerie. The army is primarily responsible for external security and shares some domestic security responsibilities; it reports to the minister delegate at the presidency in charge of defense. The Rapid Intervention Battalion reports directly to the president. Civilian authorities at times did not maintain control over security forces. Members of security forces committed numerous abuses.

In July jailed separatist leader Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe announced he talked with the government regarding the prospects for peace in the Anglophone regions. The government, however, denied Ayuk Tabe’s announcement, and other separatists opposed the talks. Cameroon Renaissance Movement president Maurice Kamto urged Cameroonians to stage nationwide peaceful protests on September 22 to demand a resolution to the crisis in the Anglophone regions and for electoral reform before the December 6 regional elections. Hundreds of protesters were arrested, including journalists, and Kamto was placed under unofficial house arrest.

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by security forces, armed Anglophone separatists, Boko Haram, and ISIS-West Africa; forced disappearances by security forces; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government, Cameroonian peacekeepers deployed to UN missions, and nonstate armed groups; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrests; political prisoners or detainees; politically motivated reprisal against individuals located outside the country; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, and the internet, including violence, threats of violence, or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, censorship, and criminal libel laws; substantial interference with the right of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; serious restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; restrictions on political participation; serious acts of corruption; lack of investigations and accountability for violence against women; unlawful recruitment or use of child soldiers; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex persons; and the existence or use of laws criminalizing same-sex sexual conduct between adults.

Although the government took steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, it did not do so systematically and rarely made the proceedings public. Some offenders continued to act with impunity.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were numerous reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary and unlawful killings through excessive use of force in the execution of their official duties. Most of the killings were associated with the armed conflict in the two Anglophone regions (see also section 1.g., Abuses in Internal Conflict). Additionally, many included unarmed civilians not in conflict-afflicted areas, and others resulted from the use of excessive force on citizens by government agents, including members of defense and security forces.

The Ministry of Defense, through the Secretariat of State in charge of the National Gendarmerie (SED), is responsible for investigating whether security force killings, including police killings, are justifiable. Prosecutions related to these matters are conducted through the Military Tribunal. In some high-profile cases, preliminary investigations are entrusted to a mixed commission of inquiry, including civilian members with relevant professional backgrounds.

On July 23, the Douala-based private television channel Equinoxe TV reported that a taxi driver died in a health center after he was allegedly tortured at the 6th district police station in New Bell, a neighborhood in Douala. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Mandela Center, on July 20, Mitterrand Tchouateum Nja parked his vehicle incorrectly and was subsequently punished for refusing to pay a bribe. Police commissioner Mvoundi Evina and members of the 21st Armored Reconnaissance Battalion of Terminus Saint Michel, including Chief Warrant Officer Lawrence Nkimantap, brutally assaulted Tchouateum. After the assault, police detained Tchouateum at the 6th district police district. He was transferred to Nkoloulou district medical center on July 22 after his condition rapidly deteriorated. Tchouateum remained chained to his hospital bed until a few hours before his death, which came soon after his release from police custody. As of December 8, the Mandela Center had filed a complaint with the Military Tribunal in Douala, and the Military Tribunal had referred the case to the High Court. No criminal charges had been filed against the perpetrators of the attack as of December 15.

According to the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa (CHRNA), on August 13, Cameroonian soldiers raided the village of Mautu in the Southwest Region and killed seven unarmed civilians. The victims, including an elderly man and a pregnant woman known as ‘Mami Blessing,’ were reportedly shot at close range in their homes. Before these killings, the military raided a church on the outskirts of Mautu and shot the church’s pastor. The soldiers executed two boys alongside the pastor and shot another as he tried to escape. The soldiers allegedly invaded the church because the worshipers sympathized with separatist ideology. The CHRNA reported that they were unaware of any ongoing investigation into the incident.

On August 11, multiple media outlets reported the beheading of 32-year-old Comfort Tumassang by suspected Anglophone separatists. The incident took place in Muyuka, Southwest Region. A video circulating on social media that day showed a woman seated on the ground with her hands tied behind her. She begged for mercy before she was beheaded; her body was left in the street. Human Rights Watch also reviewed a second video, filmed before the killing, showing separatists interrogating and threatening Tumassang, whom they accused of collaborating with the military. The three main Anglophone separatist groups—the Ambazonia Governing Council, the “interim government” led by Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, and its splinter faction led by Samuel Ikome Sako—condemned the killing and denied responsibility for the crime.

On November 24, suspected Islamist terrorists attacked the village of Gabas, located within Mayo Tsanaga in the Far North Region, killing three civilians. On November 25, a member of the Gabas vigilance committee, Jean Baptiste Yagai, told the media that terrorists attacked at about 7:00 p.m., hours before the normal time that residents leave the village to hide in the surrounding hills every evening to avoid Boko Haram and ISIS-WA attacks. The assault on Gabas was the latest in a series of attacks by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA in the Far North Region, especially within Mayo Tsanaga and Mayo Sava. In November at least six civilians were killed in attacks in Mayo Sava, while five civilians were killed and at least four others abducted in Mayo Moskota.

While the government repeatedly promised to investigate abuses committed by security forces, it did not do so transparently or systematically. Unlike in the previous year, however, some information was made available concerning the outcome of investigations into abuses committed by security forces as well as the status of some ongoing trials. President Biya ordered an investigation into the February 14 killing by security forces of an estimated 23 civilians in the village of Ngarbuh, Northwest Region. On April 22, the president released a summary of the investigation’s findings, identifying a sergeant, a gendarme, and a soldier as responsible for the killing of 13 civilians during the incident. President Biya reportedly ordered disciplinary action against the battalion commander, who oversaw the operation, and the arrest of the other three suspects. Their trial was expected to begin on December 17 at the Yaounde Military Tribunal. A total of 17 members of a vigilante group and a former separatist fighter were also charged but remained at large.

On September 21, the Yaounde Military Tribunal issued a sentence in the case against seven soldiers accused of the extrajudicial killing of two women and two children, believed to have taken place in 2015 in the village of Zelevet, Far North Region. The lead officer, Captain Etienne Fabassou, was found guilty of conspiracy to commit murder and breach of regulations for his role and received a sentence of 10 years in prison. Sergeant Cyriaque Bityala, Corporal Barnabas Donssou Gorvo, and Soldier First Class Jean Baptiste Tchanga Chiengang were found guilty of murder and breach of regulations and were also sentenced to 10 years in prison. Of the remaining three soldiers, Soldier First Class Ghislain Landry Ntieche Fewou was found guilty of breach of regulations and sentenced to two years in prison. The two remaining soldiers were found not guilty. Both the prosecution and all those convicted filed appeals. In the case of the prosecution, the sentences were less than those the prosecution had requested.

b. Disappearance

As in the previous year, government security forces were believed to be responsible for enforced disappearances of suspected Anglophone separatists or their supporters. Multiple credible organizations documented the case of Samuel Abue Adjiekha (aka “Wazizi”), a news anchor for Buea-based independent radio station Chillen Muzik and Television Pidgin. Wazizi was detained on August 2, 2019, and pronounced dead on June 5. Wazizi was accused of having connections with armed Anglophone separatists. He was transferred to a military-run facility in Buea on

August 7, 2019, and never appeared in court, despite several scheduled hearings. In a June 5 press release, the Defense Ministry asserted Wazizi died of severe sepsis on August 17, 2019 (see also section 1.c.). On June 5, the French ambassador to Cameroon told the press at the end of an audience with President Biya that the president had promised to order an investigation into Wazizi’s death. As of mid-December, there were no developments reported on the investigation.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution and law prohibit such practices, there were reports that security force members tortured or otherwise abused citizens, including separatist fighters and political opponents. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented several cases in which security forces severely mistreated political opponents and others in which armed separatists mistreated civilians and members of defense forces. Public officials, or persons acting at their behest, reportedly carried out acts that resulted in severe physical, mental, and emotional trauma.

On July 2, the Cameroon Journalists Trade Union denounced the hijacking of Wazizi’s body as a move to conceal signs of torture on the journalist during his detention.

On July 7, according to CHRDA, 39-year-old Ben Uze was tortured and maimed by the military in Wum, Northwest Region. He reportedly sold 10 liters of palm wine and pineapples to soldiers, who took the items but refused to pay. An eyewitness reportedly told CHRDA that the victim reported the matter to the army commander, who accused him of associating with separatists. As a result, when Uze refused to pay the soldiers he encountered, they severely beat him, causing severe damage to his eye and groin area. Uze reportedly died of his injuries in a hospital.

In a September 24 preliminary report, Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) lawyers claimed police violently suppressed the party’s peaceful demonstrations throughout the country, beating protesters and arresting journalists. They stated that police elements, who used water cannons, batons, and tear gas, injured demonstrators in cities throughout the country, including Douala, Bafoussam, and Kribi. The lawyers reported cases of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment at Yaounde central police station No. 1, listing Therese Assomo Ondoua, Nde Dikko Jaurel, and Wilfred Siewe as some of those tortured during their arrests. Anecdotal evidence and accounts by some protesters who were released corroborated the lawyers’ preliminary report.

Human Rights Watch reported that on May 30, separatists kidnapped and tortured a humanitarian worker in Bali, Northwest Region, accusing him of collaborating with security forces. They released him the following day, and he spent several days in a Bamenda hospital for treatment of the injuries sustained during his detention. The victim told Human Rights Watch that he was blindfolded and taken to a separatist camp on a motorbike. He was later taken to a second location, tied to a tree with a rope, and beaten and kicked before he was released.

According to the *Conduct in UN Field Missions* online portal, five allegations were submitted during the year of sexual exploitation and abuse by Cameroonian peacekeepers deployed to UN peacekeeping missions. There were also 29 other open allegations dating from previous years of sexual exploitation and abuse by Cameroonian peacekeepers deployed to UN peacekeeping missions, including 16 from 2019, four from 2018, four from 2017, two from 2016, and three from 2015. As of September, the Cameroonian government had not yet provided the accountability measures taken for all 34 open cases. Of the open cases, nine allegedly involved rape of a child, 16 allegedly involved transactional sex with one or more adults, five allegedly involved an exploitative relationship with an adult, one allegedly involved rape of an adult, and one allegedly involved sexual assault of an adult. There were also two cases that involved multiple instances within each case. One of those case allegedly involved four instances of rape of a child and two instances of exploitative relationships with an adult. The other case allegedly involved rape by two peacekeepers of two children and an exploitative relationship with an adult.

Credible organizations including the CHRDA reported that Reverend Thomas Nganyu Tangem died chained to his hospital bed in Yaounde in July. He was a member of the Mbengwi Monastery in the Northwest Region and was arrested at Mile 16 in Buea in 2018 and transferred to Yaounde where he was allegedly tortured while in detention for two years without charge. Equinoxe Television reported that on several occasions, prison authorities dismissed concerns expressed by other prisoners regarding his health. On July 25, prison authorities took him to Yaounde Central Hospital, where he was shackled to his hospital bed. He died a few days later on August 5. Tangem was never officially charged with a crime.

Anecdotal reports suggested there were cases of rape and sexual abuse by persons associated with the government in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions. NGOs also indicated armed separatists were involved in rape and sexual abuse cases in the two regions.

There was at least one report of medical abuse by government forces. Djilieu Pommier alleged that after being arrested during MRC demonstrations on September 22 in Bafang (West Region), army Lieutenant Mvoundi Evina on September 22 injected him with an unknown substance. As a result of the injection, Djilieu lost the use of his legs and was effectively paralyzed pending an official medical diagnosis.

On May 6, the High Court of Mbam and Inoubou in the Center Region sentenced the head of local police to a three-year suspended prison sentence for mistreatment of 16-year-old Ibrahim Bello in 2017 that resulted in his losing both legs and his left hand; a colleague received a four-year prison sentence. The court ordered them jointly to pay 50 million Central African francs (CFA) (\$86,800) in damages. Following the ruling, the NGO Mandela Center filed an appeal requesting damages be increased to CFA one billion (\$1.74 million) due to the gravity of the injuries. The

convicts and the General Delegation of National Security also filed separate appeals, requesting that damages be reduced. In mid-December, the court of appeals of the Center Region in Yaounde opened appeal hearings; there was no ruling as of year’s end.

While some investigations and prosecutions were conducted and a few sanctions meted out, especially in high-profile cases, security force impunity remained a concern. Such impunity involved most defense and security force branches from the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) to police. Few of the reports of trials involved those in command. The General Delegation of National Security and the Secretariat of State for Defense in charge of the National Gendarmerie investigated some abuses. The government meted out some sanctions to convicted low-level offenders, and other investigations were ongoing as of year’s end. Factors contributing to impunity included the government’s lack of transparency on the steps taken to address allegations of human rights violations.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages and poor-quality food, gross overcrowding, physical abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care.

Physical Conditions: Overcrowding remained a significant problem in most prisons, especially in major urban centers. Prison overcrowding was exacerbated by sustained increases in the number of arrests related to the conflict in the Anglophone regions and the September 22 protests by the opposition MRC. Officials held prisoners in dilapidated, colonial-era prisons. Authorities often held pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners in the same cells. In many prisons, toilets were only common pits. In some cases, female detainees benefitted from better living conditions, including improved toilet facilities and less crowded living quarters. Prisons generally had separate wards for men, women, and children. Authorities reported that the sick were held separately from the general prison population, but this was often not the case.

According to prison administration officials, the country had 79 operational prisons, with an intended capacity of 17,915. As of October 31, the overall prison population was 22,430, including 580 women and 577 minors. The Ministry of Exterior Relations’ Minister Delegate to the Commonwealth Felix Mbayu provided the figures on November 19, within the framework of the 67th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

Access to food, water, sanitation, heating and ventilation, lighting, and medical care was inadequate. Consequently, malnutrition, tuberculosis, bronchitis, malaria, hepatitis, scabies, and numerous other treatable conditions, including infections, were rampant. Hundreds of cases of COVID-19 were recorded among inmates released from five prisons across Cameroon’s Central Region in April, according to Reuters, which cited unpublished government data. According to the article, the Yaounde Central Prison was the worst hit. More than 31 inmates died there in April, compared with a prepandemic average of one or two a month. A senior prison official reportedly told Reuters that no inmates were tested for COVID-19.

Physical abuse by prison guards and prisoner-on-prisoner violence were problems. Some credible organizations reported that physical abuse by persons associated with the government was less prevalent in prisons than in gendarmerie and police detention cells, where some officers often used harsh interrogation techniques. Conversely, violence among inmates was reported in virtually all prisons. In an August 18 letter to the Minister of Justice Shufai Blaise Sevidzem Berinyuy representing detained Anglophones separatists at the Kondengui Principal Prison, informed the minister that Reverend Kisob Bertin was attacked on August 16 in his bed by fellow inmates. He stated that witnesses said the attack had the blessing of the prison administrators, who told some inmates they would not face sanctions if they attacked “Ambazonians” and seized their property.

Administration: Authorities allegedly did not address all credible allegations of mistreatment. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, independent authorities did not investigate the most credible allegations of mistreatment. Visitors needed formal authorization from the state counsel; without authorization, they had to bribe prison staff to communicate with inmates. Overall prison visits were limited in compliance with COVID-19-related restrictions. Authorities allowed prisoners and detainees to observe their religious practices without interference.

Independent Monitoring: Independent monitoring of prisons was constrained by COVID-19-related restrictions. The NGO Nouveaux Droits de l’Homme, however, stated it visited a few prisons up to April and a few others as of August, including in Bafia, Bafoussam, and Nanga Eboko. The Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Archdiocese in Bamenda also stated it conducted regular visits to the Bamenda Central Prison and provided legal assistance to inmates facing crimes related to the ongoing Anglophone conflict at the Military Tribunal. The National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (NCHRF) reported it did not conduct any prison visits as of late August because of a lack of funding.

Improvements: The new Douala-Ngoma Central Prison located approximately 12 miles from Douala, was completed. The facility is expected to help address prison overcrowding and improve the living environment of inmates at the Douala-New Bell central prison. The new prison needed equipment and some other finishing touches before receiving inmates. On April 15, President Biya signed a decree to decongest prisons as part of government measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, approximately 1,800 inmates were freed by May 8. As of July, the total number of inmates who benefitted from the decree was estimated at close to 3,000.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness in court of an arrest or detention. The law states that except in the case of an individual discovered in the act of committing a felony or misdemeanor, the officials making the arrest must disclose their identity and inform the person arrested of the reason. Any person illegally detained by police, the state counsel, or the examining magistrate may receive compensation. The government did not always respect these provisions.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires police to obtain a warrant from a judge or prosecutor before making an arrest, except when a person is caught in the act of committing a crime, but police often did not respect this requirement. The law provides that suspects be brought promptly before a judge or prosecutor, although this often did not occur, and citizens were detained without judicial authorization. Police may legally detain a person in connection with a common crime for up to 48 hours, renewable once. This period may, with the written approval of the state counsel, be exceptionally extended twice before charges are brought. Nevertheless, police and gendarmes reportedly often exceeded these detention periods. The law also permits detention without charge for renewable periods of 15 days by administrative authorities, such as governors and civilian government officials serving in territorial command. The law also provides that individuals arrested on suspicion of terrorism and certain other crimes may be detained for investigation for periods of 15 days, renewable without limitation with authorization of the prosecutor. The law allows access to legal counsel and family members, although police frequently denied detainees access to both. The law prohibits incommunicado detention, but such cases occurred, especially in connection with the Anglophone crisis. The law permits bail, allows citizens the right to appeal, and provides the right to sue for unlawful arrest, but these rights were seldom respected.

Arbitrary Arrest: Police, gendarmes, the BIR, and other government authorities reportedly continued to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily, often holding them for prolonged periods without charge or trial and at times incommunicado. “Friday arrests,” a practice whereby individuals arrested on a Friday typically remained in detention until at least Monday unless they paid a bribe, continued, although on a limited scale.

On May 11, six volunteers from “Survival Cameroon,” a fundraising initiative launched by opposition leader Maurice Kamto to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, were arrested while handing out free personal protective equipment in Yaounde. They were placed in custody at the Yaounde II police district without judicial authorization. The volunteers were released on bail after several days of detention. Two other volunteers were arrested on May 14 while filming the transfer of their comrades from the police station to the prosecutor’s office. The prosecutor released them on bail on May 26. Christian Penda Ekoka, president of the management committee of the initiative, stated that three other volunteers who were peacefully distributing free masks and hand sanitizer in Sangmelima, South Region on May 23 were arrested and placed in custody at the city’s central police station. They were released on bail after several days of detention. The individuals were accused of unauthorized demonstrations. If found guilty, they could face four years in prison.

According to Cameroon People’s Party (CPP) president Edith Kah Walla, on September 19, members of security forces abducted at least five members of the NGO consortium Stand Up for Cameroon. The arrest occurred after the members left a “Friday in Black” meeting held at the CPP headquarters in Douala. The abductees, including Moussa Bello, Etienne Ntsama, Mira Angoung, and Tehle Membou, were reportedly subjected to brutality and interrogated without legal counsel.

On September 19, 21, and 22, security forces arrested approximately 593 citizens in connection with peaceful protests called for by the MRC opposition party. While some were released, the Military Tribunal charged many with revolution, insurrection, and rebellion and placed them in pretrial detention. MRC women’s wing president Awasum Mispa was arrested on November 21 when she led a group of women to visit MRC president Maurice Kamto. On November 23, an investigating magistrate at the Yaounde Military Tribunal charged her with complicity in revolution and rebellion and placed her in pretrial detention for a period of six months renewable. On November 27, the same investigating magistrate dropped the charges and released her. Kamto’s de facto house arrest was lifted on December 8, two days after the election of regional councilors. The Yaounde Court of First Instance had not opened any substantive hearings in the proceedings initiated by his lawyers.

Pretrial Detention: The code of criminal procedure provides for a maximum of 18 months’ detention before trial, but many detainees waited years to appear in court. The 2014 antiterrorism law provides that a suspect may be held indefinitely in investigative detention with the authorization of the prosecutor. Of the 22,430 detainees as of October 31, a total of 14,973 were pretrial detainees.

Amadou Vamoulke, a former general manager of state-owned Cameroon Radio Television, who was arrested and detained in 2016 on embezzlement charges, continued to await trial at the Kondengui Central Prison. After at least 30 hearings as of July 15, the Special Criminal Court failed to produce strong evidence to support the charges against him.

See also section 1.c., Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, case of Thomas Tangem.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, but this is not always the case in practice. In some instances, the outcomes of trials appeared influenced by the government, especially in politically sensitive cases. Authorities did not always respect and enforce court orders.

Despite the judiciary’s partial independence from the executive and legislative branches, the president appoints all members of the bench and legal department of the judicial branch, including the president of the Supreme Court, and may dismiss them at will.

Military courts may exercise jurisdiction over civilians in a broad number of offenses including civil unrest.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial without undue delay, and the defendant is presumed innocent. Authorities did not always respect the law. Criminal defendants have the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges, with free assistance of an interpreter. Defendants have the right to be present and to consult with an attorney of their choice, but in many cases the government did not respect this right, restricting access to lawyers, particularly in cases of individuals suspected of complicity with Boko Haram, Anglophone separatists, or political opponents. When defendants cannot pay for their own legal defense, the court may appoint trial counsel at public expense, but the process was often burdensome and lengthy and the quality of legal assistance was poor. Authorities generally allowed defendants to question witnesses and to present witnesses and evidence on their own behalf. Defendants have the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense and not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but authorities often violated this right. Hearsay and anonymous testimony were sometimes permitted, especially in terrorism cases. Defendants are entitled to an interpreter at no charge, but often the quality of interpretation was described as poor. Defendants may appeal convictions. In some cases, authorities did not give the victim a chance to confront the offender and present witnesses or evidence to support his or her case.

Courts often limited procedural rights in politically sensitive cases. On July 16, the Court of Appeals in Yaounde heard a case involving 10 Anglophone separatist leaders, including Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, whom the Yaounde Military Tribunal sentenced to life imprisonment in August 2019. On July 17, prison officials denied the Anglophone leaders access to their defense lawyers, according to several lawyers, including Emmanuel Simh. In a July 17 statement, Dabney Yerima, the jailed vice president of the Ambazonian “interim government,” confirmed and then denounced the denial of access to legal representation. Although they were present at the court, Sisiku and his companions reportedly refused to be judged in French, demanding that their trial be conducted in English. The case was adjourned until August 20, and then until September 17 when a final decision was to be delivered. They reportedly did not receive a legal opinion from the court official on this case. On August 20, the case was postponed until September, after the magistrate in charge was transferred to the Supreme Court. On September 18, the Court of Appeals eventually confirmed the initial life sentence for separatist leader Ayuk Tabe and others.

There were cases where the courts demonstrated some neutrality. On June 16, the Administrative Court in Yaounde ruled that the minister of territorial administration had acted illegally when he independently declared that the leader of the CPP, Edith Kah Walla, had been replaced by the proregime party founder Samuel Fon before the October 2018 Presidential election.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of newly identified political detainees as of September, most of whom were associated with the September 22 protests called for by the MRC opposition party. While there were no official statistics available, the number of detainees was estimated to be close to 600. Prominent among the detainees were MRC Treasurer Alain Fogue and Maurice Kamto’s spokesperson, Olivier Bibou Nissack. Political prisoners were detained under heightened security, often in SED facilities and at the Kondengui Principal Prison and the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaounde. Some were allegedly held at Directorate General for External Research facilities. The government did not readily permit access to such individuals.

The 10 Anglophone separatist leaders, including Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, whom the Yaounde Military Tribunal sentenced to life imprisonment on August 20, 2019, remained in detention, as the Court of Appeals in September confirmed the sentence. MRC Vice President Mamadou Mota and a few other MRC members, in addition to the 10 leaders sentenced to life, remained in detention as of December, despite a reduction of their sentences upon appeal. Former minister of state for territorial administration Marafa Hamidou Yaya, who was convicted in 2012 on corruption charges and sentenced to 25 years’ imprisonment, remained in detention. In 2016 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention described Marafa’s detention as “a violation of international laws.” The government did not respond to repeated requests for members of the diplomatic community to meet with Marafa.

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country

There were credible reports that for political reasons the government attempted to exert bilateral pressure on other countries aimed at having them take adverse legal action against specific individuals, including Anglophone separatists and other political opponents.

On August 18, Serge Sihonou, the secretary of MRC’s operation in Gabon, was allegedly detained by the counterinterference service of the B2 Brigade in Libreville, where he was harassed and physically abused. He was accused of continuing to run an MRC operation that he created in the town of Oyam, despite a ban on the party in

Gabon. On August 21, MRC leader Maurice Kamto sent a letter to the Gabonese ambassador to Cameroon denouncing the treatment and demanding the release of Sihonou. In his letter, Kamto accused the Cameroonian ambassador to Gabon of instigating the harassment of MRC members in Gabon since 2018.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens and organizations have the right to seek civil remedies for human rights abuses through administrative procedures or the legal system; both options involved lengthy delays. Individuals and organizations may appeal adverse decisions domestically or to regional human rights bodies, but the decisions of regional human rights bodies are not binding.

There were reports that the government delegate to the Douala City Council had failed to comply with civil court decisions pertaining to labor matters of city council employees. The Douala City mayor, who replaced the government delegate, however, found a compromise solution after more than 30 months of litigation between Douala City Council workers and the government.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Although the constitution and law prohibit arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence, these rights were subject to restriction in the interests of the state, and there were credible reports police and gendarmes abused their positions by harassing citizens and conducting searches without warrants.

The law permits a police officer to enter a private home during daylight hours without a warrant only if pursuing a person suspected of or seen committing a crime. Police and gendarmes often did not comply with this provision and entered private homes without a warrant whenever they wished. According to media reports, security forces on June 27 conducted raids in the mostly Anglophone neighborhoods of Obili and Melen in Yaounde, following the detonation of two improvised explosive devices in the city. They entered private homes by force and arrested anyone deemed suspicious or who did not possess a national identification card. Many of those detained told media they had been harassed, humiliated, and abused in the process. A video on social media showed more than 100 men and women sitting on the ground surrounded by security officers within a large courtyard in Obili. At the end of the operation, the security officers took away dozens of persons without identification.

An administrative authority, including a governor or senior divisional officer, may authorize police to conduct neighborhood sweeps without warrants, and this practice occurred. Following a late March decision by Jean Claude Tsila, the senior divisional officer for Mfoundi, approximately 50 prostitutes were placed in police custody after coming in contact with travelers in quarantine due to COVID-19 in some hotels in Yaounde.

g. Abuses in Internal Conflict

Killings: There were credible reports that members of government forces and separatist fighters deliberately killed innocent citizens. On April 22, according to credible organizations, members of government security forces executed six unarmed men in Muambong, Southwest Region. The victims included four former separatist fighters who had accepted an amnesty offer in 2019. Most of the executions were reportedly carried out in front of the victims' relatives.

On March 12, according to credible accounts, Anglophone separatists killed at least five civilians held hostage, including the deputy mayor of Babessi council, Chefor Oscar, and the newly elected mayor of the Mbengwi council, Ndangsa Kenedy Akam, who was kidnapped 15 days earlier. The killings took place after the Cameroonian army raided their camp, freed five hostages, and killed seven separatist fighters. According to reports, the hostages were subjected to both physical and sexual violence. On May 10, Anglophone separatists ambushed and killed the newly elected mayor of Mamfe, 35-year-old Priestley Ashu Ojong. Shortly after news of Ashu Ojong's death, Lucas Ayaba Cho, leader of the Ambazonia Defense Forces (ADF), praised ADF fighters for eliminating a high value target.

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA intensified deadly attacks on civilians and members of security forces in the Far North Region. *L'Oeil du Sahel* reported that on June 25 in Goudoumboul, Boko Haram insurgents killed 18-year-old Almada Ali. On June 26, in Cheripouri, assailants believed to be Boko Haram fighters ambushed and killed 12-year-old Ousmane and his older brother while they were asleep in their home.

On October 24, according to Amnesty International, unidentified gunmen in civilian clothes on motorbikes attacked a school in Kumba in the Southwest Region, firing into a classroom. The attackers killed eight schoolchildren and injured another 12 children. On October 28, Minister of Communications Rene Emmanuel Sadi announced security forces had killed one of the gunmen allegedly responsible for the attack. The government declared a national day of mourning and a delegation of government ministers traveled to Kumba to meet with the victims' family members. The government also sent a medical team to provide medical and psychosocial support. On the day of the attack, Communications Minister Sadi announced an investigation into the killing, but the government did not follow through with an independent investigation into the attack.

On December 6, unidentified gunmen shot at Encho Elias Ambi, a municipal councilor for Widikum in the Northwest Region, after he cast his vote for the election of regional councilors. He was not harmed during the incident.

Abductions: Armed separatists kidnapped dozens of persons, burned property, and threatened voters in the period before the February 9 legislative and municipal elections. Armed separatists allegedly kidnapped several traditional leaders in retaliation for the traditional leaders’ participation in the December 6 regional elections. They held noncombatants as hostages, including public officials, political leaders, teachers, schoolchildren, and traditional leaders. There were credible allegations that separatists physically abused abduction victims, including committing rape, using stress positions, administering beatings, and flogging with machetes. In some cases the abductors freed the victims after either negotiations or receiving ransom payments.

On July 13, armed individuals abducted at least 60 men, women, and children in the village of Mmouck Leteh in the Southwest Region. On July 15, a local administrator told the BBC that gunmen entered the village late at night, moved through the community kidnapping persons—many of whom were at a local snack bar—and led them away at gunpoint to an unknown destination. According to the BBC, a significant number of the victims were children between the ages of 12 and 16. Later that day, the BBC reported that at least 12 of the abductees had escaped captivity and had returned to the community, and that separatist leader General Ayeke had demanded a ransom totaling \$2,500 for the remaining victims. Several hours later, multiple local media outlets announced the release of the remaining abductees, reportedly after negotiations with separatists.

On July 7, five civilians were kidnapped in Muyuka, Southwest Region, presumably by Anglophone separatists. A week later, the victims were still missing. On May 30, according to Human Rights Watch, separatists abducted and mistreated a humanitarian worker, whom they accused of being a spy. The worker was released the next day. In Bambui on May 30, separatists abducted seven staff members of a religious nonprofit organization; they were released after two days.

On April 24, armed men abducted three government officials in Boyo, Northwest Region.

On January 21, suspected separatists abducted 24 schoolchildren in Kumba in the Southwest Region. Security forces rescued the hostages in an operation later the same day, killing two of the abductors in the process.

On January 5, armed separatists kidnapped Choh Issa Bouba, the opposition party Social Democratic Front’s mayor of Babessi, Northwest Region, along with some councilors of his municipality.

On December 12, Anglophone separatists allegedly kidnapped traditional leader Nelson Sheteh in the Northwest Region. On December 13, suspected Anglophone separatists in the Southwest Region abducted three traditional rulers, including Chief Emmanuel Ikome Ngalle. Ngalle died in separatist custody and the other two traditional leaders, Simon Kombe, traditional ruler of Bolifamba, and Emmanuel Efande Ewule, traditional ruler of Lower Bokova, were released on December 14. Many Cameroonians believed that the timing of the abductions and social media statements by separatist leaders suggested the abductions were in retaliation against leaders who participated in the December 6 regional elections.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to anecdotal reports, members of government forces physically abused civilians and prisoners in their custody. Reports suggested that on January 5, a detainee died in Ndu, Northwest Region after being abused by soldiers (See also section 1.a).

In a March 13 report available online, journalist Moki Edwin Kindzeka reported that Anglophone separatists killed four hostages, including a local official, after troops attacked their camp in a western part of the country. The military reportedly freed five others. According to Kindzeka, a young woman recovering at a military base in Bafoussam told a reporter that she had also been raped by her abductors.

Child Soldiers: The government did not generally recruit or use child soldiers, but there were allegations that some members of defense and security forces in at least one instance allegedly used a child for intelligence gathering in the Southwest Region in November 2019. Some community neighborhood watch groups, known as vigilance committees, may have used and recruited children as young as 12 in operations against Boko Haram and ISIS-WA. In July, Human Rights Watch reported that from mid-March to late April, soldiers in Mozogo, Far North Region, forced civilians to perform local night guard duty to protect against attacks by Boko Haram. According to the report, the 42nd Motorized Infantry Battalion in Mozogo worked with local authorities to compile lists of approximately 90 men and at least one boy who were required to join night guard duty.

Boko Haram continued to use child soldiers, including girls, in its attacks on civilian and military targets. There were also some reports that Anglophone separatists in the Southwest and Northwest Regions used children as fighters.

According to UNICEF, from January to December 2019, there were nine incidents involved minors used as forced suicide bombers in the Far North Region (Mayo Sava, Mayo Tsanaga, and Logone-and-Chari divisions). UNICEF’s analysis found individuals manipulated into serving as suicide bombers or forced suicide bombers included children whose parents had been killed in violence, abducted orphaned children, and women whose husbands had been killed.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: As in the previous year, there were reports of repeated attacks on health workers and institutions and the use of firearms around health facilities by members of security forces and Anglophone separatists.

Human Rights Watch reported in July that security forces and armed separatists attacked hospitals and medical staff on multiple occasions. The organization indicated that on June 10, following clashes between separatists and soldiers, including members of the BIR, a grenade was fired into the courtyard of the district hospital in Bali, Northwest Region. One patient died, four others were injured, and four vehicles were destroyed. Human Rights Watch further reported that on June 30 soldiers forcibly entered St. Elizabeth Catholic Hospital in Shisong, Northwest Region, looking for wounded separatists. They fired three gunshots and broke down doors, causing panic among patients, nurses, and other workers who fled.

On July 6, separatists in the Southwest Region killed a Doctors without Borders community health worker known as Felix, after accusing him of collaborating with the military. In addition, in response to the announcement of the *Presidential Plan for the Reconstruction and Development of the Northwest and Southwest Regions* on July 5, separatists launched attacks on July 6 in villages across the Anglophone regions, destroying public buildings in Lebialem and Manyu in the Southwest Region as well as in Bui, Donga and Mantung, and Ngoketunjia in the Northwest Region.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, but the government often restricted this right, explicitly or implicitly. Government failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters led to de facto restrictions on the freedom of speech, assembly, and association.

Freedom of Speech: Government officials penalized individuals or organizations that criticized or expressed views at odds with government policy. Individuals who criticized the government publicly or privately frequently faced reprisals. On several occasions, the government invoked laws requiring permits or government notification of public protests to stifle discourse.

On July 24, the senior divisional officer for Upper Plateaux in the West Region, Yampen Ousmanou, sent a warning letter to Jean Rameau Sokoudjou, the traditional ruler of Bamendjou in the West Region, accusing him of rebellion after he organized a meeting in his palace on July 18 without prior approval. The meeting reportedly brought together citizens of diverse political sides and civil society groups to exchange ideas about the country’s future.

Freedom of Press and Media, including Online Media: Private media were active and expressed a wide spectrum of adherence to journalistic ethics. The landscape included constraints on editorial independence, in part due to fear of reprisal from state and nonstate actors, including separatists connected to the armed conflict in the two Anglophone regions. Journalists reported practicing self-censorship to avoid repercussions, including financial repercussions, for criticizing or contradicting the government.

Violence and Harassment: Police, gendarmes, and other government agents arrested, detained, physically attacked, and intimidated journalists. Journalists were arrested in connection with their reporting on the Anglophone crisis. The state’s failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on journalists created de facto restrictions.

On May 15, according to reports by multiple organizations, including the National Association of English-speaking Journalists, security forces arrested freelance journalist Kingsley Fomunyoy Njoka. He was taken from his home in Douala and detained incommunicado for 24 days. According to Njoka’s legal team, the security forces accused him of criticizing the government’s handling of the Anglophone crisis on social media. On June 12, the Yaounde Military Tribunal indicted the journalist on multiple counts, including secession and collusion with an armed group, and placed him in pretrial detention at the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaounde. On July 13, Njoka filed a defamation complaint against Colonel Cyrille Serge Atonfack, the Ministry of Defense’s communication officer. The suit followed a July 5 interview on Equinoxe Television, during which Atonfack said that Njoka admitted he participated in the killing of former separatist fighters who surrendered at disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) centers in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. He characterized Njoka as the coordinator of the Bui Warriors, an armed separatist group based in Bui, Northwest Region. On June 30, Reporters without Borders noted the allegations against Njoka had not yet been substantiated. They stated that persons close to the journalist characterized his criticism of the government’s handling of the Anglophone crisis as factual and stated the security forces probably monitored him because he regularly discussed the conflict with colleagues.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Under a 1990 law, the Ministry of Communication requires editors to submit two signed copies of their newspapers within two hours after publication. Journalists and media outlets reported practicing self-censorship, especially if the National Communication Council had suspended them previously.

Following the February 14 killing of civilians by security forces in Ngarbuh, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji attacked media for publishing the Human Rights Watch report that accused the Cameroonian army of killing civilians. Atanga Nji particularly targeted Equinoxe Television, STV, Radio Balafon, and *Le Jour*, asking them to stop relaying false information designed to undermine Cameroonian security forces (see also section 1.a.).

Libel/Slander Laws: Press freedom is constrained by libel and slander laws. Libel, slander, defamation, and blasphemy are treated as criminal offenses. The law authorizes the government to initiate a criminal suit when the president or other senior government officials are the alleged victims. These laws place the burden of proof on the defendant, and crimes are punishable by prison terms and heavy fines. While the government may initiate criminal

suits when the president or other senior government official are alleged victims, ordinary citizens may also file libel or slander suits, but the law is often applied selectively and privileges senior government officials and well connected individuals. Some persons successfully filed defamation suits and prosecuted perpetrators. In other cases, courts were reluctant to open hearings. For example, Paul Chouta was detained for alleged defamation of a person who was close to the government, whereas courts failed to acknowledge Alice Nkom’s and Maximilienne Ngo Mbe’s defamation suit against someone associated with the government and did not open hearings on the case.

National Security: Authorities often cited laws against terrorism or protecting national security to threaten critics of the government.

Nongovernmental Impact: There were reports that separatist groups in the Southwest and Northwest Regions sought to inhibit freedom of expression, including for the press. In a January article available online, journalist Moki Edwin Kindzeka reported that journalists in Cameroon’s English-speaking regions said separatists were attacking them because of critical reporting and their refusal to broadcast rebel propaganda. He said separatist intimidation was reportedly intensifying as the country prepared for local and parliamentary elections, which the separatists had vowed to stop. Mbuotna Zacks Anabi, the manager and presenter of the community radio station Stone FM in the town of Ndop in the Northwest Region, said the station stopped broadcasting after armed men stormed it on January 27 and set the building on fire.

Internet Freedom

Anecdotal reports indicated that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. The government occasionally disrupted access to the internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

Although there were no legal restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events, some school authorities reportedly sanctioned academic personnel for teaching politically sensitive topics, and administrative officials often deterred teachers from criticizing the government.

On May 6, Horace Ngomo Manga, the vice chancellor of the University of Buea, terminated the contract of Felix Nkongho Agbor Balla, an instructor in the Department of English Law. The decision was reportedly taken by the university’s disciplinary panel after Higher Education Minister Jacques Fame Ndongo urged the vice chancellor to address Agbor Balla’s alleged ethics violations. Ngomo Manga cited an examination question during the first semester of the 2019-20 academic year that read, “The Anglophone crisis since 2016 was caused by the lawyers’ and teachers’ strike—assess the validity of this statement.”

On October 24, unidentified armed men killed seven children and wounded at least 13 others during an attack on Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy, a school in the town of Kumba, Southwest Region. In a press release also released on October 24, Minister of Communication Rene Emmanuel Sadi attributed the attack to separatists. He said 10 heavily armed men on three motorbikes entered the school and opened fire on students inside classrooms. Reports indicated attackers also used machetes. He reported that five girls and one boy died during the attack and described the conditions of several of the wounded as critical, noting that they were taken to hospitals in Kumba and in other nearby towns.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government limited and restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Although the law provides for freedom of peaceful assembly, the government often restricted this right. The law requires organizers of public meetings, demonstrations, and processions to notify officials in advance but does not require prior government approval for public assemblies, nor does it authorize the government to suppress public assemblies that it did not approve in advance. Nevertheless, officials routinely asserted the law implicitly authorizes the government to grant or deny permission for public assemblies. The government often refused to grant permits for gatherings and used force to suppress assemblies for which it had not issued permits. Authorities typically cited security concerns as the basis for deciding to block assemblies. Progovernment groups, however, were generally authorized to organize public demonstrations.

On August 13, the divisional officer of Yaounde II, Mamadi Mahamat, banned the civil marriage ceremony of MRC leader Maurice Kamto’s spokesperson, Olivier Bibou Nissack, which was scheduled to take place at Massao Hotel in Yaounde. Mamadi stated that the organizers of the marriage did not seek authorization for the public event. He also called into question the credentials of Civil Status Secretary Valentin Lewoua, who was to help officiate the marriage. He further stated the chief officiating officer, traditional leader and Maurice Kamto associate Biloa Effa, had been removed by the minister of territorial administration in December 2019.

On August 15, the divisional officer of Nkongsamba in the Littoral Region banned a meeting of the MRC scheduled to take place at the party’s headquarters. Following the ban, some MRC members met at the residence of a colleague, Fabrice Tchoumen, for a private discussion. On August 19, the chief commissioner in Nkongsamba, Joseph Hamadjam, summoned Tchoumen for questioning on August 24, saying that he organized a meeting at his residence without authorization. As of September, the MRC had not reported any ongoing legal proceedings following the questioning.

In September authorities took a series of administrative decisions banning public demonstrations after the MRC called for peaceful protests on September 22 over the government’s decision to organize regional elections before resolving the crisis in the two Anglophone regions and advancing electoral reforms. On September 11, the governors of the Littoral and Center Regions banned public meetings and demonstrations indefinitely. Three days later, Territorial Administration Minister Atanga Nji, in a letter to the two governors and the governor of the West Region, urged them to arrest anyone organizing or leading demonstrations. On September 15, Minister of Communication Rene Emmanuel Sadi warned political parties that protests could be considered “insurrection” and that illegal demonstrations across the country would be punished under the antiterror law. The communications minister also threatened to ban the MRC.

On September 19, the headquarters of the opposition CPP in Yaounde was surrounded by more than 30 police officers and gendarmes. The Yaounde district officer stated that the CPP was holding a public meeting without approval, but CPP president Edith Kahbang Walla said in a statement published the same day that they were holding a regularly scheduled meeting for their members.

According to MRC leaders, an estimated 593 party members were detained throughout the country after they attempted to hold peaceful marches on September 22. Several persons in the Yaounde protest sustained minor injuries. They were reportedly arrested due to concerns they were participating in an insurrection. Videos of the protest showed security officers dispersing crowds with water cannons and tear gas and police firing rubber bullets at protestors. The MRC reported that security forces seriously wounded one individual at the residence of its leader, Maurice Kamto, during the night of September 21.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and law provide for the freedom of association, but the law also limits this right. On the recommendation of the prefect, the Ministry of Territorial Administration may suspend the activities of an association for three months on grounds that the association is disrupting public order. The minister may also dissolve an association if it is deemed a threat to state security. National associations may acquire legal status by declaring themselves in writing to the ministry, but the ministry must explicitly register foreign associations, and the president must accredit religious groups upon the recommendation of the Minister of Territorial Administration. The law imposes heavy fines for individuals who form and operate any such association without ministry approval. The law prohibits organizations that advocate a goal contrary to the constitution, laws, and morality, as well as those that aim to challenge the security, territorial integrity, national unity, national integration, or republican form of the state.

Conditions for recognition of political parties, NGOs, and associations were complicated, involved long delays, and were unevenly enforced. This resulted in associations operating in legal uncertainty with their activities tolerated but not formally approved.

During the year the government did not officially ban any organizations, but it restricted the MRC’s activities, and virtually prohibited all events planned by the party. In a September 7 press briefing following the announcement of regional elections, Minister Atanga Nji suggested that the MRC could be officially banned. The Ministry of Territorial Administration regularly used threats of suspension against political parties, NGOs, and media outlets. c. Freedom of Religion

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, at times the government restricted these rights. Growing concerns over the entry of armed groups into Cameroon from the Central African Republic, the conflict with Boko Haram and ISIS-WA in the Far North Region, and the armed conflict in the two Anglophone regions appeared to have prompted the government to adopt a more restrictive approach to refugee movements. The government made it more difficult for refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons to move freely in the country.

In-country Movement: Using minor infractions as a pretext, police and gendarmes often extorted bribes and harassed travelers at roadblocks and checkpoints in cities and on most highways. Police frequently stopped travelers to check identification documents, including national identity cards, passports, residence permits, vehicle registrations, and tax receipts as security and immigration control measures. Just as in the previous year, humanitarian organizations cited difficulty in accessing certain areas and in some instances were harassed and denied passage by government authorities. Unaccompanied women were frequently harassed when traveling alone. Authorities restricted movements of persons and goods, including motorbikes, especially in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, citing security concerns. Armed Anglophone separatists also restricted the movements of persons and goods in the two Anglophone regions, sometimes in a deliberate attempt to harass and intimidate the local population. Separatist warlords “taxed” cocoa trucks passing through rural areas of the Southwest region. They often used weekly lockdowns referred to as ghost towns to enforce restrictions on movement, in which the armed separatists demanded all businesses close and residents stay home.

On March 13, Northwest Region Governor Adolphe Lele Lafrique signed an order prohibiting the circulation of motorbikes. The order was enforceable daily in the divisions of Bui, Mezam, Momo, Menchum, Ngohketunja, and Boyo from 6:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. For the same reasons, on September 4, the mayor of Bamenda, Paul Tembeng Achobong, announced a ban on commercial and private motorbikes within most of the city, scheduled to begin on September 7, with the goal of limiting separatist activity in the city. In a press release later that day, Northwest Region Governor Lafrique endorsed the ban and accused separatists of perpetrating attacks on motorbikes. Hours later, the leader of the Southern Cameroons Civil Society Consortium separatist group, John Mbah Akuroh, stated in a video on social media that the prohibition would impoverish thousands of commercial motorbike riders and their families and urged car owners in Bamenda to ground their vehicles until the government lifted the ban.

Foreign Travel: Citizens have the right to leave the country without arbitrary restrictions. The movement of some political opponents and debtors, however, were monitored, and their travel documents were often confiscated to confine them to the country. To obtain exit permits, citizens need a valid passport and visa for their country of destination. With the development of human trafficking operations and networks, children and young women were often subjected to more stringent controls at border locations, including airports.

e. Status of Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

According to UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates, there were 1,755,787 persons of concern as of July, including one million IDPs, of whom 297,321 were in the Far North Region and 679,000 in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. In addition, the country had an estimated 354,360 returnees in the Far North, Northwest, and Southwest Regions. The population of concern increased by more than 58 percent since 2018. Mass displacements in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of the country, largely after lawyers’ protests and a teachers’ strike in 2016 morphed into armed conflict, were the primary drivers of this increase. Humanitarian access remained very limited, since military officials maintained tight control over access in the area. Additional factors driving displacements included the desire to flee Boko Haram violence.

The government put in place disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration centers to promote the safe, voluntary return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs in the Far North, Northwest, and Southwest Regions. Reports suggested the government’s DDR centers were inadequately resourced, and many of the returnees left them. Provision of basic social services to IDPs and assistance to returnees were carried out by relief actors with minimal support from the government. In the Northwest and Southwest Regions, the government did not facilitate efforts to ensure unfettered access for humanitarian actors to deliver aid to persons in need. It made some efforts, however, to provide urgently needed in-kind assistance to crisis-affected IDPs in the Northwest and Southwest Regions based on its *Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan*. This assistance was distributed to populations without an assessment of their needs and only to persons in accessible areas, especially in regional capital cities.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government at times cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations regarding treatment of IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, and other persons of concern. The country operated an open door policy. This policy, however, was not translated into a progressive legal framework allowing refugees their rights as stated in various legal instruments.

Refoulement: Unlike in 2019, there were no reported cases of forced returns.

Access to Asylum: The laws provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system of providing protection to refugees, but the implementation of this system was weak. UNHCR continued to provide documentation and assistance to the refugee population, although local authorities did not always recognize the documents as official, which prevented refugees from travelling and engaging in business activities. UNHCR and the government continued to conduct biometric verification and registration of refugees in the Far North Region, including those not living in refugee camps.

Freedom of Movement: The government often cited security concerns and suspected criminal activity to restrict the movement of refugees and asylum seekers.

Access to Basic Services: Refugees had limited access to health care, education, and employment opportunities. Their rural host communities faced similar problems, but the situation was somewhat worse for refugees. Access to these services varied according to the location of the refugees, with those in camps receiving support through humanitarian assistance, while refugees living in host communities faced difficulty receiving services.

Durable Solutions: In October 2019 the United Nations and the governments of Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR) initiated the voluntary repatriation of some 4,000 CAR refugees from Cameroon. Some 500 refugees reportedly signed up in the first phase of the program. By the end of December 2019, UNHCR had repatriated more than 3,500 CAR refugees out of those who expressed the desire to return. The repatriation followed a June 2019 tripartite agreement between Cameroon, CAR, and UNHCR to provide for a safe and dignified repatriation of 285,000 CAR refugees to their home country. Repatriation of CAR refugees stopped in the first part of the year due to funding shortfalls and COVID-19 restrictions.

Temporary Protection: The government continued to provide temporary and unofficial protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees, extending this protection to hundreds of individuals, including third-country nationals who had fled violence in the CAR. Due to their unofficial status and inability to access services or support, many of these individuals were subject to harassment and other abuses.

g. Stateless Persons

Not applicable.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage. Elections, however, were often marked by irregularities.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: On February 9, the country held simultaneous legislative and municipal elections. An estimated 32 political parties participated in the legislative election and 43 participated in the municipal election. Security concerns constrained voter participation in the two Anglophone regions. The courts annulled the legislative elections in 11 constituencies of the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions because voter turnout was below 10 percent; elections were rerun in 11 constituencies of the two Anglophone regions on March 22. The ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) won 152 of the 180 National Assembly seats and won control of 316 of 360 local councils. Opposing political parties lost significantly when compared with previous elections. Irregularities, including lack of equal access to media and campaign spaces, restrictions on the ability of opposition candidates to register for the election, ballot stuffing, lack of ballot secrecy, voter intimidation, inconsistent use of identification cards, and lack of expertise among local polling officials prompted the Constitutional Council and Regional Administrative Courts to annul some legislative elections.

As of September the Supreme Court, which has final jurisdiction over challenges to the municipal election, had not issued a final ruling. Overall, eight opposition political parties gained access to the National Assembly, and nine won control of local councils. Estimates of voter turnout showed an unprecedented low rate of participation of 43 percent for the legislative and municipal elections. The results could partially be attributed to the call for a boycott of the elections by the MRC and other opposition parties. On December 6, the first-ever election of regional councilors was held, 24 years after they were provided for in the 1996 Constitution. Due to the gains achieved in the municipal councils that made up the electoral college in February elections, the ruling CPDM won in nine of the 10 regions. The government cited the regional elections as a sign of progress on decentralization, although some opposition and civil society groups criticized the elections as not signifying meaningful decentralization of power.

In October 2018, Paul Biya was re-elected president in an election marked by irregularities and against the backdrop of protracted sociopolitical unrest in the two Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions.

Political Parties and Political Participation: As of December, the country had 307 registered political parties. The CPDM remained dominant at every level of government due to restrictions on opposition political parties, gerrymandering, unbalanced media coverage, the use of government resources for CPDM campaigning, interference with the right of opposition parties to register as candidates and to organize during electoral campaigns, and the influence of traditional rulers, who were largely coopted by the CPDM. Traditional rulers, who receive salaries from the government, openly declared their support for President Biya prior to the presidential election, and some reportedly compelled residents of their constituencies to prove they did not vote for an opposition candidate by presenting unused ballots. Traditional rulers who refused to associate with the government were either removed or threatened with destitution. Membership in the ruling political party conferred significant advantages, including in the allocation of key jobs in state-owned entities and the civil service.

Human rights organizations and opposition political actors considered the drawing of voter districts and distribution of parliamentary or municipal councilors’ seats unfair. They complained that smaller districts considered CPDM strongholds were allocated a disproportionate number of seats compared with more populous districts where the opposition was expected to poll strongly. Managers of state-owned companies and other high-level government officials used corporate resources to campaign for candidates sponsored by the ruling party.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities in the political process and they did participate, although women remained underrepresented at all levels of government. In parliament, women occupied 87 of 280 seats—61 in the National Assembly and 26 in the Senate. Women held 11 of 66 cabinet positions. Similar disparities existed in other senior-level offices, including territorial command and security and defense positions.

The law stipulates that a person can vote at 20 years of age.

The minority Baka, a nomadic Pygmy people, were not represented in the Senate, National Assembly, or higher offices of government.

On June 16, the Administrative Court for the Center Region in Yaounde reinstated Edith Kah Walla as the leader of the CPP. In 2018, Minister of Territorial Administration Atanga Nji issued a decision naming Samuel Fon as head of the party, replacing Edith Kah Walla who was elected in 2011 as party leader. The June 16 Administrative Court decision nullified Atanga Nji's decision.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption. Officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. The law identifies different offenses as corruption, including influence peddling, involvement in a prohibited employment, and nondeclaration of conflict of interest. Reporting corruption was encouraged through exempting whistleblowers from criminal proceedings. Corruption in official examinations is punishable by up to five years' imprisonment, a substantial monetary fine, or both. In addition to the laws, the National Anticorruption Agency (CONAC), the Special Criminal Court, the National Financial Investigation Agency, the Ministry in Charge of Supreme State Audit, and the Audit Bench of the Supreme Court also contributed to fighting corruption in the country. CONAC, the most prominent of the anticorruption agencies, was constrained by the absence of a law empowering it to combat corruption. There were reports that senior officials sentenced to prison were not always required to forfeit ill-gotten gains.

In a prelude to World Anticorruption Day, CONAC on July 10 released a report, *2010-2020, A decade of fighting corruption in Cameroon: Achievements*, that listed the most corrupt sectors in the country, including public procurement, finance, justice, and the security forces. CONAC further stated that with assistance from the Special Criminal Tribunal and the Supreme Court, it was able to help recover CFA 1.7 billion (\$2.9 million) of government funds.

Corruption: There were consistent allegations of mismanagement of resources with respect to the funds raised to counter COVID-19. Social Democratic Front member of parliament Jean Michel Nintcheu raised the issue several times, challenging the health minister to prove the contrary. He expressed concerns that the money contributed by the public through a national solidarity fund was subject to corruption. He cited overbilling and conflicts of interests within the Ministry of Health.

In a June 12 release, Human Rights Watch urged the government to publish immediately information on the revenues, disbursements, and management of its Health Solidarity Fund, adding that health-care facilities had made mandatory contributions to the emergency fund for more than 25 years. Medical staff told Human Rights Watch that they believed the government had never disbursed any money from the fund, including in response to COVID-19, even though health-care facilities continued to contribute 10 percent of their revenues. Human Rights Watch announced that on May 11, it wrote to the health minister, inquiring about the rules governing the fund and its activities but had not yet received a response.

In September, after 18 months of investigation, the investigating judge at the Special Criminal Court accused former defense minister Edgar Alain Mebe Ngo of embezzling CFA 236 billion (\$4.1 million) as part of the purchase of military equipment for the army. Mebe Ngo and his wife have been awaiting trial at the Kondengui Central Prison since their arrest.

The government continued Operation Sparrow Hawk that was launched in 2006 to fight embezzlement of public funds. As in the previous year, the Special Criminal Court opened new corruption cases and issued verdicts on some pending cases. The National Gendarmerie maintained a toll-free telephone line to allow citizens to report acts of corruption in the Gendarmerie.

Financial Disclosure: The constitution requires senior government officials, including members of the cabinet, to declare their assets prior to and after leaving office, but the government did not implement the law.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups investigated and published findings on human rights cases. Government officials, however, impeded many local human rights NGOs by harassing their members, limiting access to prisoners, refusing to share information, and threatening violence against NGO personnel. Human rights defenders and activists received anonymous threats by telephone, text message, and email. The government took no action to investigate or prevent such occurrences. The government criticized reports from international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Crisis Group, accusing them of publishing baseless accusations.

When Human Rights Watch released its February 25 report, *Civilians Massacred in Separatist Area*, Minister of Communication Rene Emmanuel Sadi accused it and other organizations of being tirelessly determined to undermine the image of the country and the stability of its institutions. Minister Sadi stated the government was in possession of irrefutable evidence establishing links between the author of the Human Rights Watch report and terrorists.

As in the previous year, there were several reports of intimidation, threats, and attacks aimed at human rights activists. On January 26, the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network’s head office was the victim of arson, which destroyed the organization’s archives and part of the executive director’s office.

During the *Droit de Reponse* (“Right to Respond”) program on Equinoxe Television on August 30, Jacqueline Nkoyock, a member of the CPDM central committee, alleged that Phillipe Nanga, the coordinator of NGO Un Monde Avenir, embezzled CFA 280 million (\$486,000) provided for a capacity-building project on youth political participation. Nkoyock made the accusation after Nanga remarked that addressing the issue of citizen participation was a prerequisite for free and fair regional elections.

Government Human Rights Bodies: In June 2019 the government passed a law establishing the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC), as a replacement for the existing NCHRF. Like the NCHRF, the CHRC is a nominally independent but government-funded institution. The law establishing the CHRC extended its mandate to protect human rights. The CHRC was not operational during the year because the president had not yet designated its members.

The NCHRF continued to operate in place of the CHRC. While the NCHRF coordinated actions with NGOs and participated in some inquiry commissions, it remained poorly funded and ceased some of its traditional activities, including conducting prison and detention sites visits. NGOs, civil society groups, and the general population considered the NCHRF dedicated and effective but inadequately resourced and with insufficient ability to hold human rights abusers to account effectively. Several observers questioned the decision to establish a new institution and expressed concerns regarding its ability to confront the government that funds it. After MRC leader Maurice Kamto called for peaceful protests on September 22, interim NCHRF president James Mouangue Kobila issued a statement on behalf of the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms on September 16, condemning the proposed protests. After commission member Christophe Bobiokono published a post on Facebook distancing himself from the statement published on behalf of the NCHRF had Kobila as the sole signatory. On September 29, interim NCHRF President James Mouangue Kobila sent a letter to the webmaster of the NCHRF, ordered that Bobiokono be immediately excluded from all NCHRF WhatsApp platforms.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape and provides penalties of between five and 10 years of imprisonment for convicted rapists. Police and courts rarely investigated or prosecuted rape cases, especially since victims often did not report them. The law does not address spousal rape (see also section 1.g.).

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, although assault is prohibited and punishable by imprisonment and fines.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law protects the bodily integrity of persons and prohibits genital mutilation. Perpetrators are subject to a prison sentence of 10 to 20 years or imprisonment for life if the offender habitually carries out this practice for commercial purposes or the practice causes death. FGM/C remained a problem, but its prevalence was low. As in the previous year, children were reportedly subjected to FGM/C in isolated areas of the Far North, East, and Southwest Regions and among the Choa and Ejagham ethnic groups.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Widows were sometimes forcibly married to one of their deceased husband’s relatives to secure continued use of property left by the husband, including the marital home. To better protect women, including widows, the government included provisions in the law outlawing the eviction of a spouse from the marital home by any person other than the other spouse. The practice of widow rites, by which widows forgo certain activities such as bathing or freedom of movement, was also prevalent in some parts of the country, including in some rural communities of the West Region.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment. Offenders can be subject to imprisonment for periods of six months to one year and a monetary fine. If the victim is a minor, the penalty can be one to three years in prison. If the offender is the victim’s teacher, the penalty can increase to three to five years in prison. Despite these legal provisions, sexual harassment was widespread and there were no reports that anyone was fined or imprisoned for sexual harassment, in part due to sexual harassment victims’ reluctance to file official complaints for fear of reprisal and or stigmatization.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Discrimination: The constitution provides women and men the same legal status and rights. The government, however, often did not enforce the law. In practice, women did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. Although local government officials claimed women had access to land in their constituencies, the overall sociocultural practice of denying women the right to own land, especially through inheritance, was prevalent in most regions. The government did not implement any official discriminatory policy against women in such areas as divorce, child custody, employment, credit, pay, owning or managing business or property, education, the judicial process, or housing. There were legal restrictions to women’s employment in some occupations and industries (see section 7.d.). Within the private sector, fewer women occupied positions of responsibility.

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship through their parents, but not through birth in the country’s territory; the responsibility to register a child’s birth falls upon parents. Birth registration was not provided on a discriminatory basis, but many births went unregistered because children were not always born in health facilities. Also, many parents faced challenges in reaching local government offices. While failure to register births did not have immediate consequences for children, in the long run children without birth certificates found it difficult to register for official examinations or secure identification documents.

On February 18, the National Civil Status Bureau and the Ministry of Health signed a memorandum of understanding, as part of a universal birth registration project, implemented by the civil status bureau with donor financial support. The partnership is expected to allow the various actors to improve birth declarations and registrations.

Education: The law provides for tuition-free compulsory primary education up to the age of 12. The law punishes any parent with sufficient means who refuses to send his or her child to school with a fine. The punishment is imprisonment from one to two years for repeat offenders. Children were generally expected to complete primary education at 12. Secondary school students must pay tuition and other fees in addition to buying uniforms and books. This rendered secondary education unaffordable for many children.

A 2019 UN Women report highlighted gender disparity in education, particularly in secondary education. According to the report, the literacy rate in 2019 was lower for women and girls (86 percent) than for men and boys (97 percent).

During the year separatist attacks on schools in the Southwest and Northwest Regions continued to disrupt the normal operation of schools (see section 1.g.). During the year research by Human Rights Watch showed that school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated previously existing inequalities and that children who were already most at risk of being excluded from a quality education had been most affected.

Child Abuse: The law prohibits various forms of child abuse, including but not limited to assault, indecency, kidnapping, forced labor, rape, sexual harassment, and situations where one parent refuses to disclose the identity of the other parent to the child. Penalties for offenses range from a token fine for forced labor to imprisonment for life in the case of assault leading to death or serious harm. Despite these legal provisions, child abuse remained a problem. Children continued to suffer corporal punishment, both within families and at school. Boko Haram continued to abduct children for use as child soldiers or as suicide bombers (see section 1.g.).

On June 29, the daily newspaper *La Nouvelle Expression* published an article by Herve Villard Njete, who reported that a man named Mahop forced his own daughter to become his sexual partner from the age of nine to 15. Mahop was arrested after his neighbors reported him to police. According to the newspaper, the young girl, who lived in the PK 11 neighborhood in Douala V, tested positive for HIV.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage is 18. Despite the law, according to UNICEF’s 2018 child marriage data, 31 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before they turned 18 and, of these, 10 percent were married before they turned 15. Childhood marriages were more prevalent in the northern part of the country. The law punishes anyone who compels an individual into marriage with imprisonment of from five to 10 years and fines.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation and the sale, offering, or procuring for prostitution of children, and practices related to child pornography. A conviction requires proof of a threat, fraud, deception, force, or other forms of coercion. Penalties include imprisonment of between 10 and 20 years and a substantial fine. The law does not set a minimum age for consensual sex. According to anecdotal reports, children younger than 18 were exploited in commercial sex, especially by restaurant and bar promoters, although no statistics were available. Anecdotal reports suggested the ongoing crisis in the two Anglophone regions had contributed to a dramatic increase in the prostitution of underage girls and number of early pregnancies, especially in areas with IDPs.

Displaced Children: Many displaced children continued to live on the streets of urban centers, although the number was in decline as a result of stringent security measures and a law that criminalizes vagrancy. According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration, there were approximately 2,570 unaccompanied children in the Far North Region as of April 2019, including IDPs, returnees, out-of-camp refugees, and other migrants (see also sections 2.e. and 2.f.). These children faced many challenges, including limited access to school, health, and protection. Thousands of children were harmed by the humanitarian crisis in the Northwest and Southwest. These children faced significant abuses of their rights by armed forces and nonstate armed actors alike. The government had not established structures to ensure that internally displaced children were protected from recruitment by nonstate armed groups and terrorist organizations.

In April the Ministry of Social Affairs started an operation to remove thousands of homeless children from the streets. Henri Nyambi Dikosso, the director of national solidarity at the ministry, led a group of social workers and hospital staff who removed up to 160 children from the street by April 1. The spread of COVID-19 forced authorities to begin the project earlier than planned.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

The Jewish population was very small, and there were no known reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The constitution protects the rights of all persons, including persons with disabilities. A 2010 law provides additional protection to persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities. The protections under the law cover access to education and vocational training, employment, health services, information and cultural activities, communications, buildings, sports and leisure, transportation, housing, and other state services. Some infrastructure projects were made accessible to persons with mobility issues. Public education is free for persons with disabilities and children born of parents with disabilities. Initial vocational training, medical treatment, and employment must be provided “when possible,” and public assistance “when needed.” The government did not enforce these provisions effectively.

There were no reports of police or other government officials inciting, perpetrating, or condoning violence against persons with disabilities during the year.

The majority of children with disabilities attended school with peers without disabilities. The government introduced inclusive education in many schools and reviewed the curriculum of teacher training colleges to include training in inclusive education skills. Other children with disabilities continued to attend separate schools, such as the Bulu Blind Center in Buea and the Yaounde Special School for Hearing-impaired Children. Human Rights Watch expressed concern that all factors affecting children’s education during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected children with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities did not receive adequate protection in conflict zones.

Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups

The population consists of more than 275 ethnic groups. Members of President Biya’s Beti/Bulu ethnic group from the South Region continued to hold many key positions and were disproportionately represented in the government, state-owned businesses, and security forces.

Indigenous People

An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 Baka, including Bakola and Bagyeli, resided primarily in (and were the earliest known inhabitants of) the forested areas of the South and East Regions. The government did not effectively protect the civil or political rights of either group. Logging companies continued to destroy indigenous peoples’ naturally forested land without compensation. Other ethnic groups often treated the Baka as inferior and sometimes subjected them to unfair and exploitative labor practices. The government continued long-standing efforts to provide birth certificates and national identity cards to Baka. Most Baka did not have these documents, and efforts to reach them were impeded by the difficulty in reaching homes deep in the forest.

There were credible reports from NGOs that the Mbororo, nomadic pastoralists living mostly in the North, East, Adamawa, and Northwest Regions, continued to be subject to harassment, sometimes with the complicity of administrative or judicial authorities. In a letter dated August 17, a group of eight persons writing on behalf of the Fulani-Mbororo community and associated with the CPDM, denounced what they described as the demeaning stigmatization of the Fulani-Mbororo as an indigenous and minority people in the country. They stated that the Fulani-Mbororo are not indigenous in the same way as the Baka and are not a minority.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults is illegal and punishable by a prison sentence lasting between six months and five years and a token fine.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) rights organizations such as the Cameroonian Foundation for AIDS, Humanity First Cameroon, Alternatives Cameroon, the National Observatory of the Rights of LGBTI Persons and Their Defenders, and others, continued to report arbitrary arrests of LGBTI persons. Data collected through the UNITY platform, a group of 34 local organizations dedicated to the LGBTI population, indicated an increase in arbitrary arrests of LGBTI individuals in the first half of the year. Many of the arrests occurred in Bafoussam on May 17 when police arrested—and later released—53 LGBTI individuals celebrating the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia at a time when COVID-19-related restrictions prohibited large gatherings. LGBTI individuals also continued to face significant stigma, violence, and discrimination from their families, communities, and the government.

The constitution provides for equal rights for all citizens, but the law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination against LGBTI persons in housing, employment, nationality, and access to government services such as health care. Security forces sometimes harassed persons on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including individuals found with condoms and lubricants. Fear of exposure affected individuals' willingness to access HIV/AIDS services, and a number of HIV-positive men who had sex with men reported also partnering with women, in part to conceal their sexual orientation. Anecdotal reports suggested some discrimination occurred in places of employment with respect to sexual orientation.

In an online article, a human rights activist with the pseudonym John Enama reported that on July 28 the Court of First Instance of Bafang in the West Region imposed fines on four men who were arrested due to what was described as their LGBTI conduct on June 9 in Kekem. The four men pleaded guilty but their lawyer highlighted extenuating circumstances, alleging that their confessions were given under threats and torture. The court accepted the guilty pleas; one man was sentenced to a month in prison and a token fine; the other three were fined. Because the families of the defendants were unwilling to pay the fines, two local NGOs paid them, and they were released.

LGBTI organizations could not officially register as such and so sought registration either as general human rights organizations or as health-focused organizations. Many LGBTI organizations found that operating health programs, particularly HIV programs, shielded them from potential harassment or shutdown rather than promoting advocacy for LGBTI persons as their primary mission.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Persons with HIV often suffered social discrimination and were isolated from their families and society, in part also due to a lack of education on the disease. As in the previous year, while no specific cases of discrimination in employment were made public, anecdotal reports indicated some discrimination occurred with respect to HIV status, especially in the private sector.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Several cases of vigilante action and arson attacks were reported involving arbitrary killings and destruction of both public and private property. In March an organization known as Friends of the Press Network, based in Kumba in the Southwest Region, reported that Southern Cameroon Defense Forces fighters summarily executed Cecilia Bemo, Itoe Ajasco, and Ferdinand Bajaraka Okon, whom they suspected of witchcraft. The killings happened in Ediki Mbonge in the Southwest Region. The victims were reportedly tortured by their executioners, who forced them to confess and summarily shot them.

Promotion of Acts of Discrimination

During the year there was a pattern of discrimination and repeated threats between members of the Bamileke and Beti/Ekan tribes. The animosity started when Maurice Kamto, a Bamileke, challenged the results of the 2018 presidential election and gained momentum when Kamto boycotted the municipal and legislative elections in February. Various government and political figures issued messages via social and traditional media that inflamed intergroup tensions, despite legal provisions against hate speech.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the rights of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct strikes, albeit with significant restrictions. The right does not apply to defined groups of workers, including defense and national security personnel, prison administration civil servants, and judicial and legal personnel. The law also prohibits antiunion discrimination and requires the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. Statutory limitations and other practices substantially restricted these rights. The law does not permit the creation of a union that includes both public and private sector workers or the creation of a union that includes different, even if closely related, sectors. The law requires that unions register with the government, have a minimum of 20 members, and formalize the union by submitting a constitution and bylaws. Founding members must also have clean police records. Those who form a union and carry out union activities without registration can be fined under the law. More than 100 trade unions and 12 trade union confederations were in operation, including one public sector confederation. Trade unions or associations of public servants may not join a foreign occupational or labor organization without prior authorization from the minister of territorial administration, who is responsible for “supervising public freedoms.”

The constitution and law provide for collective bargaining between workers and management as well as between labor federations and business associations in each sector of the economy. The law does not apply to the agricultural or informal sectors, which included most of the workforce.

Legal strikes or lockouts may be called only after conciliation and arbitration procedures have been exhausted. Workers who ignore procedures to conduct a strike may be dismissed or fined. Free industrial zones are subject to some labor laws, but there are several exceptions. The employers have the right to determine salaries according to productivity, the free negotiation of work contracts, and the automatic issuance of work permits for foreign workers. Some laws intended to target terrorists can impose harsh legal penalties on legitimate trade union activity.

The government and employers do not effectively enforce the applicable laws on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Penalties for violations were rarely enforced and were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. Administrative judicial procedures were infrequent and subject to lengthy delays and appeals.

Collective agreements are binding until three months after a party has given notice to terminate. As in the previous year, there were no reported allegations that the minister of labor and social security negotiated collective agreements with trade unionists who had nothing to do with the sectors concerned and did not involve trade union confederations that prepared the draft agreements.

Many employers continued to use subcontractors to avoid hiring workers with bargaining rights. Major companies, including parastatal companies, reportedly engaged in the practice according to workers from Energy of Cameroon, the water company Camerounaise des Eaux, cement manufacturer Cimencam, Guinness, Aluminum Smelter, COTCO, Ecobank, and many others. Subcontracting reportedly involved all categories of personnel, from the lowest to senior levels. As a result, workers with equal expertise and experience did not always enjoy similar protections when working for the same business, and subcontracted personnel typically lacked a legal basis to file complaints.

Workers’ representatives said many workers were granted technical leave because of COVID-19, which took a heavy toll on most businesses.

Several strikes were announced. Some were called off after successful negotiations and some were carried out peacefully, while others faced some degree of repression.

In May the union of information and communications technology workers, Syntic, issued a notice to strike from May 22 to June 7 at Nexttel, the Cameroonian subsidiary of the Vietnamese company Viettel. According to Syntic, the strike was due to successive violations of the labor code and unilateral salary deductions. A March 25 decision from the minister of labor suspended the unilateral decision of Nexttel’s management to revise the conditions of employee remuneration. The company’s top management decided to punish the 31 dissenting workers by firing them. Syntic asked Nexttel to launch a tripartite dialogue, but Nexttel’s management had not yet answered the notice.

On May 7, 10 workers’ representatives to the Douala City Council were reinstated after spending 36 months without pay. The former government delegate to the city council, Fritz Ntone, suspended the 10 in 2017 after they organized a strike seeking improved working conditions, including health insurance. In 2017 the Littoral Court of Appeal’s Labor Arbitration Council issued a decision requesting the delegate to reinstate the workers’ representatives, but the delegate instead opposed the court decision and referred the issue back to the labor inspector. The case was once again referred to the region’s court of appeals. After multiple postponements, in October 2019 the court confirmed the initial decision to reinstate the workers’ representatives and pay their salaries and outstanding arrears, but the delegate did not comply. The May 7 reinstatement of the workers’ representatives was the result of several rounds of negotiations with the council executive, under the leadership of the new Douala mayor, Roger Mbassa Ndine. The negotiations resulted in the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the workers’ representatives and the council executive. Some of the former workers’ representatives believed the memorandum was not carried out in good faith in accordance with the court decision because the mayor refused to fulfill all commitments under the memorandum.

International labor and trade union organizations report a pattern of firing labor representatives.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The constitution and law prohibit all forms of forced and compulsory labor. The law prohibits slavery, exploitation, and debt bondage and voids any agreement in which violence was used to obtain consent. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for comparable crimes. The law also extends culpability for all crimes to accomplices and corporate entities. Although the statutory penalties are severe, the government did not enforce the law effectively, in part due to a lack of capacity to investigate trafficking and limited labor inspection and remediation resources. In addition, due to the length and expense of criminal trials and the lack of protection available to victims participating in investigations, many victims of forced or compulsory labor resorted to accepting out-of-court settlements (see also section 1.g., Child Soldiers).

Anecdotal reports of hereditary servitude imposed on former slaves in some chiefdoms in the North Region continued. Many members of the Kirdi—a predominately Christian and animist ethnic group enslaved by the Muslim Fulani in the 1800s—continued to work for traditional Fulani rulers for compensation in room and board and generally low and unregulated wages, while their children were free to pursue schooling and work of their choosing. Kirdi were also required to pay local chiefdom taxes to the Fulani, as were all other subjects. The combination of low wages and high taxes (although legal) effectively constituted forced labor. While technically free to leave, many Kirdi remained in the hierarchical and authoritarian system because of a lack of viable alternative options.

Anecdotal reports suggested that in the South and East Regions, some Baka, including children, continued to be subjected to unfair labor practices by Bantu farmers, who hired the Baka at exploitative wages to work on their farms during the harvest seasons.

Also see the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits most of the worst forms of child labor and sets 14 as the minimum age of employment. The law prohibits children from working at night or longer than eight hours per day. It also outlines tasks children younger than 18 cannot legally perform, including moving heavy objects, undertaking dangerous and unhealthy tasks, working in confined areas, and prostitution. Employers are required to provide skills training to children between the ages of 14 and 18. Because compulsory education ends at the age of 12, children who were not in school and not yet 14 were particularly vulnerable to child labor. Laws relating to hazardous work for children younger than 18 are not comprehensive, since they do not include prohibitions on work underwater or at dangerous heights. Children engaged in hazardous agricultural work, including cocoa production. The law provides penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment for those who violate child labor laws. These penalties were commensurate with those for comparable crimes, such as kidnapping.

Children younger than the minimum age of employment tended to be involved in agriculture, fishing and livestock, the service industry, sex work, and artisanal gold mining. There were reports of underage children associated with nonstate armed groups in the Far North, Southwest, and Northwest Regions. In agriculture, children were exposed to hazardous conditions, including climbing trees, handling heavy loads, using machetes, and handling agricultural chemicals. Children in artisanal gold mines and gravel quarries spent long hours filling and transporting wheelbarrows of sand or gravel, breaking stones without eye protection, and digging and washing the soil or mud, sometimes in stagnant water, to extract minerals. These activities left children vulnerable to physical injuries, waterborne diseases, and exposure to mercury. Children worked as street vendors; in fishing, where they were exposed to hazardous conditions; and largely alongside families and rather than for formal employers. Children were subjected to forced begging as *talibes* in Koranic schools.

Also see the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law contains no specific provisions against or penalties for discrimination, but the constitution in its preamble provides that all persons shall have equal rights and obligations and that every person shall have the right and the obligation to work.

Discrimination in employment and occupation allegedly occurred with respect to ethnicity, HIV status, disability, gender, and sexual orientation, especially in the private sector. There were legal restrictions on women’s employment in occupations deemed arduous or “morally inappropriate” and in industries including mining, construction, factories, and energy. Members of ethnic groups often gave preferential treatment to other members of their group in business. Persons with disabilities reportedly found it difficult to secure and access employment. There were no reliable reports of discrimination against internal migrant or foreign migrant workers, although anecdotal reports suggested such workers were vulnerable to unfair working conditions. The government took no action to eliminate or prevent discrimination and kept no records of incidents of discrimination.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The minimum wage in all sectors was greater than the World Bank’s poverty line. Premium pay for overtime ranged from 120 to 150 percent of the hourly rate, depending on the amount of overtime and whether it was weekend or late-night overtime. Despite the minimum wage law, employers often negotiated lower wages with workers, in part due to the extremely high rate of underemployment in the country. Salaries lower than the minimum wage remained prevalent in the public works sector, where many positions required unskilled labor, as well as in domestic work, where female refugees were particularly vulnerable to unfair labor practices.

The law establishes a standard workweek of 40 hours in public and private nonagricultural firms and a total of 2,400 hours per year, with a maximum limit of 48 hours per week in agricultural and related activities. There are exceptions for guards and firefighters (56 hours per week), service-sector staff (45 hours per week), and household and restaurant staff (54 hours per week). The law mandates at least 24 consecutive hours of rest weekly.

The government sets health and safety standards in the workplace. The minister in charge of labor matters establishes the list of occupational diseases in consultation with the National Commission on Industrial Hygiene and Safety. The regulations were not enforced in the informal sector. The labor code also mandates that every enterprise and establishment of any kind provide medical and health services for its employees. This stipulation was not enforced.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for enforcement of the minimum wage and workhour standards, but did not enforce the law. Penalties for violations of the law were not commensurate with those for comparable crimes, such as negligence. Ministry inspectors and occupational health physicians are responsible for monitoring health and safety standards, but the ministry lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program. The government more than doubled the total number of labor inspectors, but the number was still insufficient. Moreover, the government did not provide inspectors adequate access to vehicles or computers.

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