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 Cameroon - Amnesty International Report 2008

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HUMAN RIGHTS IN REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON

Head of State : Paul Biya
Head of government : Ephraim Inoni
Death penalty : retentionist
Population : 16.9 million
Life expectancy : 49.8 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f) : 164/148 per 1,000

Eleven men accused of “practising homosexuality” were detained. Several dozen members of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) were awaiting trial for secessionist activities. One journalist was detained and another charged and convicted for their professional activities. At least 17 prisoners were killed during a mutiny. Over 26,000 people from the Central African Republic (CAR) were living in refugee camps in eastern Cameroon. Students continued to be targeted by security officers.

BACKGROUND

Several Cameroonian soldiers based in the Bakassi Peninsula were killed during an armed attack in November. Sources in Cameroon claimed that the attackers were Nigerian soldiers, while the authorities said that the attack was carried out by insurgents. Following the attack, members of the Nigerian Senate launched a petition demanding the return of Bakassi to Nigerian sovereignty. The ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Rally (Rassemblement démocratique du peuple camerounais) won the July legislative and local elections, amid claims by opposition political parties that the elections were rigged. The trial of more than 20 former senior managers of state companies continued during 2007. They included former directors of the Real-Estate Company of Cameroon (Société immobilière du Cameroun, SIC) and of the Special Fund for Communal Equipment and Intervention (Fonds spécial d’équipement et d’intervention communale, FEICOM). Emmanuel Gérard Ondo Ndong, the director general of FEICOM, Gilles-Roger Belinga, director general of SIC, and 20 of their former colleagues were found guilty of corruption and sentenced to between 10 and 50 years’ imprisonment. The trial of several former managers of the Autonomous Port of Douala

was continuing at the end of the year. One person was killed and 22 others abducted in June by bandits in the Extreme-North province. A further 10 refugees from the CAR and six Cameroonians were also abducted from Adamaoua province and reportedly taken to the CAR. The abductors reportedly demanded ransoms but it was not clear whether the ransoms had been paid by the end of the year.

SOUTHERN CAMEROONS NATIONAL COUNCIL

About 40 members of the SCNC were arrested on 20 January as the organization's National Vice-Chairman, Nfor Ngala Nfor, was about to address a press conference in Bamenda. Several SCNC members, including Nfor Ngala Nfor, were reportedly injured during the arrests. Although most of those arrested were released within a few hours, Nfor Ngala Nfor and at least 12 others were detained without trial for nearly two months. At the end of the year, nearly 40 members of the SCNC were awaiting trial on charges ranging from wearing SCNC T-shirts to agitating for secession. In December, the case against those arrested on 20 January was dismissed by the court after the prosecution repeatedly failed to produce witnesses.

DISCRIMINATION – DETENTIONS FOR ‘PRACTISING HOMOSEXUALITY’

Six men accused of “practising homosexuality” were arrested in July in Douala. In August, a further two men were arrested in Douala and three others in Yaoundé for the same offence. All 11 men continued to be held awaiting trial at the end of the year. One man who had reportedly been detained for more than two years without trial on charges of “practising homosexuality” was released in February. The High Court in Yaoundé ruled that the state had failed to produce any evidence relevant to the charge.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

- Journalist and human rights defender Philip Njaru was detained for several hours in January by the police in Kumba. Before his release, the police told him that they had arrested him for publishing articles accusing the police of extortion and arbitrary arrests.
- In March, the UN Human Rights Committee established that the Cameroonian government had in previous years failed to protect Philip Njaru from ill-treatment and intimidation by the security forces on the basis of his human rights activities. The Committee urged the government to take action against the perpetrators and grant him effective reparation.
- A court in Kumbo, Northwest province, found journalist Wirkwa Eric Tayu guilty of criminal defamation and sentenced him in August in absentia to a one-year prison term and a fine for publishing articles accusing local government officials of corruption. An appeal against the conviction and sentence was pending at the end of the year.

- In November, four members of the Cameroonian Public Sector Trade-Union (Centrale Syndicale du Secteur Public) – including the president, Jean Marc Bikoko and the vice-president, Brigitte Tamo – were arrested by gendarmes during a peaceful demonstration demanding a rise in civil servant pay. They were released after 10 hours in custody at the gendarmerie station in Enya, Yaoundé. Brigitte Tamo and two others were beaten by the gendarmes. The demonstration took place in front of parliament in Yaoundé where parliamentarians were discussing the 2008 budget. The authorities are not known to have taken any action against the gendarmes responsible for the ill-treatment.
- Four motorbike taxi riders, popularly known as bensikin, were shot dead by riot police in Bamenda on 15 October. The shootings happened during strike action against police harassment which started on 14 October. The authorities are not known to have taken action against the police.

POLICE AND SECURITY FORCES

Prisons

In July, at least 17 prisoners were killed by members of the security forces during an operation to recapture prisoners who had escaped from Yoko prison. Prisoners had seized weapons and ammunition during their escape. Following a strike by prison guards in protest at low pay and poor working conditions, which started in December 2006, 125 guards were suspended in January 2007. They and many others had been detained for several weeks.

Students killed

- On 17 November, 17-year-old Charles Mvogo and 15-year-old Shimpe Pougou Zok were shot dead by a security officer at Abong-Mbang during a demonstration against prolonged lack of electricity power at their school.
- On 9 November, Ngome Nkwele Herbert was killed during a demonstration against the detention of his colleagues by the Kumba police on 7 November following a demonstration over lack of electricity power at their school in Kumba.
- No progress was made in bringing to justice those responsible for the killing of Ivo Obia Ngemba and Moma Bennet who were shot by police during a peaceful protest on the campus of the University of Buea in November 2006.