

# CAMEROON 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 in February 2020 that 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 observers described as marked by irregularities.

The national police and the national gendarmerie are responsible for internal security. The national police report to the General Delegation of National Security and the national gendarmerie reports to the Secretariat of State for Defense in charge of the Gendarmerie. The army 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 and military authorities at times did not maintain effective control over the security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; torture and other ill-treatment by the government and nonstate armed groups; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrests or detention; political prisoners or detainees; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for offenses allegedly committed by an individual; serious abuses in a conflict, including abductions and physical abuse, by nonstate armed groups; serious restrictions on freedom of expression, including violence, threats of violence, or unjustified detentions of journalists and censorship; 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; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation;

serious government corruption; lack of investigations and accountability for gender-based violence; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of ethnic groups, including the Massaga and Olti communities in the Southwest Region and herders and farmers in the Northwest Region; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, 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 or corruption, it did not do so systematically and rarely made public the outcome of such procedures. Impunity remained a serious problem.

Armed separatists, Boko Haram, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-West Africa, and criminal gangs also committed significant human rights abuses, some of which were investigated by the government.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person**

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

There were reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary and unlawful killings through excessive use of force in the course of their official duties. As in the previous year, most of the killings were associated with the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions (see also section 1.g., Abuses in Internal Conflict). No specific racial or ethnic communities were disproportionately targeted among the victims. There were also credible reports that armed groups in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, as well as Boko Haram and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-West Africa (ISIS-WA) in the Far North Region, committed unlawful killings.

The Ministry of Defense, through the Secretariat of State in charge of the National Gendarmerie (SED), is responsible for investigating whether killings attributed to defense and security forces are justifiable. Investigations concerning police-perpetrated killings may be conducted by the General Delegation of National

Security through its Special Division for Services Control. In some cases, preliminary investigations are entrusted to a mixed commission of inquiry, including civilian members with relevant professional backgrounds. Prosecutions related to these matters are conducted through the Military Tribunal.

In a May 29 release, Mandela Center International (MCI) reported that four soldiers of the 31st Motorized Infantry Battalion (BIM) of the Cameroonian army based in Tchollire, North Region, shot and killed Souleymanou Bouba, age 22, on April 28. According to MCI, Bouba and two other herders were returning to Cameroon with their animals from the Central African Republic (CAR) when they crossed the border and found the BIM absent from their established checkpoint. When the soldiers returned to their post and found animals and herders had crossed the CAR border into Cameroon without authorization, they pursued Bouba and his companions, located them 30 minutes from the border, and opened fire, reportedly without warning, killing Bouba. As of year's end, the case was ongoing, although the four soldiers had been released.

Northwest Governor Adolphe Lele Lafrique announced that on April 12, an armed secessionist group attacked a vehicle carrying four prison officials in Takija Kikaikelaki, a village near Kumbo in the Northwest Region. The assailants killed the four occupants of the vehicle: Kiga Theodore, the Northwest prison administration delegate; prison administrator Nang Leonel; senior prison guard Afuh Nelson; and Awono Yannick, another prison guard and driver of the vehicle. The separatists who claimed responsibility for the attack posted a video of the killings on social media. In the video, they could be seen beating the four civil servants with sticks and machetes before using their weapons to execute them.

On September 6, in Muyuka subdivision of the Southwest Region, heavily armed individuals believed to be separatists opened fired on a public bus from Douala, killing six occupants of the bus: a woman, Oba Dilonga; and five men identified as Tabi Enow, Achidi Abel, Yancho Fancis Neba, Keneth (no known last name), and the driver.

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued killing civilians, including members of vigilance committees, which are organized groups of residents cooperating with government forces in the Far North Region. Throughout the year, Boko Haram

and ISIS-WA attacked civilians 288 times, killing 134 and wounding 39. Boko Haram and ISIS-WA also killed 34 defense and security personnel and wounded 47. On May 19, terrorists attacked the locality of Tourou, killing three soldiers, including the head of the Hitaoua military post, and four civilians, including Wassa Ayouba (age 45), Danagai Guedjere (age 17), Ali Dorondo (age 63), and Zawala Moskota (age 5), according to the private newspaper *Oeil du Sahel*. On the night of May 30, an attack on Hitawa left seven persons dead and several others wounded. During a June 13 attack, terrorists killed three civilians and stole the food supplies of residents. On the night of June 25-26, terrorists killed two members of the joint multilateral force at Boudouwa, Mayo Sava division.

Although the government repeatedly promised to investigate abuses committed by security forces, it did not do so transparently or systematically. Following the April 2020 release of a summary of the findings of an investigation into the February 2020 killing by security forces of an estimated 23 civilians in the village of Ngarbuh, legal proceedings started against three security force members, 17 members of a vigilance committee, and one former separatist fighter, indicted on murder charges, at the Yaoundé Military Tribunal in June 2021, after multiple adjournments. As of the end of December 2021, only the three security force members had appeared before the court, while the members of the vigilance committee and the former separatist fighter were still awaiting their court appearance. At year's end, the court had not issued any final verdict, and the soldiers were not in detention.

## **b. Disappearance**

As in the previous year, there were reports of individuals held incommunicado by, or on behalf of government authorities, typically for brief periods of time immediately following arrest.

On July 16, for example, according to multiple accounts, members of the army allegedly arrested Dr. Punjom Njefi Yves, the chief medical officer of Bafut district hospital, in the Northwest Region. A military contact reportedly invited Punjom to a Bafut military base. Once at the military base, officials reportedly informed Punjom they suspected him of aiding separatists by providing medical assistance to injured combatants. On his way back from the military base,

unidentified masked men detained Punjom and took him to an undisclosed location. Punjom reportedly discovered six days later that he was at a Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) camp in Bamenda, Northwest Region. Barrister Amungwa Nde Ntso Nico claimed Punjom's wife told him that she did not hear from her husband again until July 30 when he informed her that he had been transferred to the SED in Yaoundé. The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC) confirmed the arrest, although with slightly differing details. According to the Commission, Punjom was arrested on July 8 under suspicion of financing terrorism and was brought before the military tribunal for the first time on August 26. He was transferred to the SED and again transferred to the Yaoundé Kondengui Central prison on September 9. The CHRC relayed that officials from SED and the Yaoundé Military Tribunal stated that Punjom had never been denied the ability to communicate with his family or his lawyer. As of December, the investigation continued, and visits to the detainee were allowed, subject to authorization by the Government Commissioner, according to the CHRC.

On January 13, armed separatists kidnapped 10 workers of the Cameroon Development Corporation Likomba rubber estate plantation in Tiko, Southwest Region, and set their tractor ablaze. In a video that surfaced online on January 15, the voices of some men, who identified themselves as "Ambazonia Restoration Forces," could be heard forcing the workers to apologize for working on the estate. One of the messages from the kidnappers suggested that the workers were kidnapped because they were being guarded by the military. The kidnappers handed guns and grenades to the plantation workers and said they should help them fight the military in Tiko. The workers remained in captivity for weeks.

### **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses**

Although the constitution and law prohibit such practices, there were reports that security force members tortured or otherwise abused individuals. Human rights organizations documented several cases in which security forces, and traditional and religious authorities severely mistreated civilians, including children, and others in which armed separatists mistreated civilians and members of defense forces. Prison guards reportedly abused detainees during the year. In its April

*Where Does Torture Take Place Around the World* report, nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom from Torture reported that citizens were tortured for their opposition to the state as well as for their perceived sexual orientation.

NGO Human Rights Watch reported that on April 10, when two lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons went to the gendarmes to report being attacked, the gendarmes on duty beat them. The men said the gendarmes held them on the floor threatened to kill them, searched their cell phones, ordered them to remove their shoes and beat the soles of their feet with a machete. They were reportedly released the following day after paying a bribe.

Human Rights Watch reported that on April 24, soldiers from the BIR severely beat and then detained between 30 and 40 motorbike riders outside of Ndop, because the soldiers allegedly suspected them of being separatist fighters. Human Rights Watch spoke to two of the motorbike riders who told them the soldiers forced them to undress and beat them with an iron hammer and their belts and kicked them. One of the motorbike riders estimated the beating lasted more than four hours. (Also see section 1.d., Arbitrary Arrest.)

Sébastien Eبالa, who alleged he was previously tortured by security forces, told NGO SOS-Torture Network that Colonel Joel Émile Bamkoui called him on June 22 and threatened to arrest and torture him again as retaliation for Eبالa coming forward publicly with his allegations of being tortured.

There were new reports during the year on cases of torture previously not publicly known. In February, Human Rights Watch released a report claiming it documented 14 cases of physical abuse or assault of individuals who had been deported to the country. Human Rights Watch alleged 13 of these cases were abuse or assault by government authorities and one case of physical abuse or assault by armed separatists. Human Rights Watch further reported that government agents raped three women in custody, subjected a man to forced labor, and severely beat individuals returned to the country after deportation. Human Rights Watch assessed several of these cases amounted to torture. In one example, a woman told Human Rights Watch she was tortured and raped by gendarmes or military men during six weeks in detention in Bamenda, Northwest Region. She

said they used ropes, tubes, boots, and belts to hit her over all her body. She said they told her she destroyed the image of the country, so she had to pay for it.

As of September, authorities had not officially released information regarding the outcome of the investigation concerning the two soldiers, two gendarme officers, and four policemen, who in February 2021 were accused of abusing a civilian in the Northwest Region. In August 17 comments, the president of the CHRC remarked that under international human rights law, the government was not required to publish the findings of the investigation. He suggested that authorities did what was essential, including putting an end to the abuses and punishing the perpetrators.

NGOs indicated armed separatists frequently sexually assaulted civilians in the Northwest and Southwest Regions (see also section 1.g., Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture).

During the evening of January 31 in Garoua, North Region, Ali Youssef, approximately age 17, died at the palace of his uncle and traditional ruler, the Lamido of Garoua, under suspicious circumstances, and his body was quickly buried. A press release from the Lamido's palace indicated that Youssef was under the influence of drugs and had been taken in at the request of his mother by his uncle. According to the press release, Youssef died of heart failure while he was undergoing detoxification. On February 2, Youssef's body was exhumed following instructions from local administrative authorities. The autopsy revealed signs of harsh treatment, and authorities referred the case to the military court in Garoua. Suspects associated with the case included Lamido Ibrahim El Rachidine; Mairamou, the Lamido's elder sister and mother of the deceased; and two soldiers assigned to the Lamido's palace. As of the end of August, all the suspects except the Lamido had reportedly been interrogated and officially indicted. Referring to the issue, the president of the CHRC indicated on September 16 that his organization could, if need be, intervene as *amicus curiae*, to make the Lamido appear before the court. As of December, no further action had been reported.

In a news broadcast on May 24, the state-owned Cameroon Radio and Television national station reported that authorities discovered a Quranic school transformed into a traditional prison in the Sabongari neighborhood of Ngaoundere, Adamawa

Region. Quranic masters reportedly held 70 youths in the prison and subjected them to physical abuse daily. Their parents had entrusted them to the Quranic instructors and believed the children were at a boarding school. The children provided testimonies that suggested they spent all their time chained, had nothing to eat, and were denied showers. Adamawa Governor Kildadi Taguieke Boukar, who visited the location on May 23, ordered the release of the children, the immediate closure of the prison, as well as an investigation. As of early September, there were no reported developments concerning the investigations.

While investigations and prosecutions were conducted and punishments imposed, the government rarely publicized the outcome of the various investigations, and impunity remained a problem. Corruption, government reluctance to acknowledge officials' errors or malfeasance, and judicial opacity contributed to impunity. The General Delegation of National Security and the Secretariat of State for Defense in charge of the National Gendarmerie investigated some abuses. The government levied punitive action against convicted low-level offenders, and other investigations continued as of year's end.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

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

**Abusive Physical Conditions:** Overcrowding remained a significant problem in most prisons, especially in major urban centers. The country's prisons have the designed capacity to accommodate 19,415 inmates. Responding to a question on the implementation of alternative penalties provided for by the code of criminal procedure, Minister of Justice Laurent Eso told parliamentarians on June 27 that the penitentiary administration had 4,351 personnel for a prison population of 32,003 inmates. Furthermore, in a report released in May, the International Federation of Actions by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT) Littoral, indicated that the six functional prisons in the Littoral Region, with an intake capacity of 1,550, had a total population of approximately 6,000 inmates. The Douala New Bell Central Prison alone, according to ACAT, had 4,000 to 4,500 inmates in the facility, which had a designed capacity of 800.

Officials held prisoners in dilapidated, colonial-era prisons. Authorities often held pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners in the same cells. In some cases, women detainees had better 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.

The conditions in detention cells located at gendarmerie and police units were worse. The cells were generally very narrow, and most of them lacked toilets and windows. Virtually all lacked beds. Unlike prisons that had separate wards for men, women, and children, separation of detainees by age and sex was not systematic in gendarmerie and police unit cells. Prison officials made extensive use of shackling as a disciplinary measure.

Access to food, potable water, sanitation, heating, ventilation, lighting, and medical care was inadequate. Inmates in the Littoral Region for example, according to ACAT, received only one meal per day. While the daily prison food appropriation per inmate increased in 2018 to 371 CFA francs (approx. 60 cents), prison officials reportedly complained that once budgeted at the beginning of the year, the food appropriation was seldom adjusted, no matter how much the prison population increased during the year. Inmates were exposed to malnutrition, tuberculosis, bronchitis, malaria, hepatitis, scabies, and numerous other contagious diseases. Cholera broke out in the Douala New Bell Central Prison in February and resurged in August, killing more than a dozen inmates as of September 1, including a member of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC), according to credible reports. Anecdotal reports suggest that poor prison conditions also promoted the development of illicit practices such as the sale of drugs, enslavement of indigent inmates, as well as male and female prostitution. Prisoner-on-prisoner violence occurred during the year.

**Administration:** Authorities allegedly did not address all credible allegations of mistreatment. Visitors for ordinary inmates needed to comply with regulations, including visiting during approved hours, observing COVID-19 pandemic-related barrier measures, and limiting the number of visitors per inmate at the same time. For politically sensitive cases, however, visitors often had additional requirements, including formal authorization from the state counsel or the government

commissioner, without which they often resorted to bribing prison staff members to communicate with inmates.

**Independent Monitoring:** Independent monitoring of prisons continued to be constrained by COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions. Diplomatic missions were granted access to visit their nationals. The CHRC regularly conducted visits to review prison conditions as part of its statutory mission. During a May 24-26 training workshop in Yaoundé, the CHRC leadership indicated that they conducted visits in 30 detention facilities in the Far North, Northwest, West, Southwest and Adamawa Regions during the first quarter of the year. The government did not readily allow independent human rights groups access to review prison conditions. Most organizations alleged that access to prisons mostly depended on the relationships between the leaders of the organizations and prison officials.

**Improvements:** The minister of justice appointed the management team of the new Douala-Ngoma Central Prison on January 4, and the team was officially commissioned on February 18. The prison, completed in 2020 with an intake capacity of 1,500 inmates, reportedly received its first inmates on September 4, when 200 prisoners were reportedly transferred to the prison from the Douala New Bell Central Prison.

#### **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 of their arrest or detention in court. 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 detainee of the reason for their arrest. Under the law, any person illegally detained by police, the state counsel, or the examining magistrate may, when the proceedings end in a no-case ruling or an acquittal which has become final, receive compensation if the defendant proves that they have suffered injury of a particularly serious nature because of such detention. 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 48-hour 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 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 conflicts in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. The law permits bail, allows citizens the right to appeal to recuse judges and provides the right to sue for unlawful arrest, but these rights were seldom respected. Bail was approved only on a selective basis, and applications to recuse judges with conflicts of interest rarely succeeded, especially in politically sensitive cases.

**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.

Multiple credible sources, including the Working Group on Human Rights, reported that on April 24, BIR soldiers detained and beat between 30 to 40 motorbike riders who were part of a funeral convoy heading to Oku from Ndop. The soldiers suspected the bike riders of collaborating with separatists and took them to the BIR base in Ndop. HRW indicated that the soldiers then transferred 23 of the bike riders to the BIR base in Bafut, approximately 27 miles from Ndop, where they held them incommunicado for approximately three weeks. On May 21, the 23 detainees were reportedly moved to the central prison in Bamenda. The

group appeared before the Bamenda Military Court at least twice as of June, but they were not yet formally charged as of December.

On May 29, in Bafoussam, West Region, according to credible NGOs and the victim himself, barrister Jean Claude Tella, a lawyer with the Cameroon Bar Association, was on his way to a meeting when three persons in civilian clothes forcibly took him to the local gendarmerie. The officials neither produced a warrant nor disclosed the reason for the arrest. While at the gendarmerie, the lawyer realized that two of the individuals were gendarmes. Tella disclosed his identity and asked to be informed regarding the reasons for his arrest. Tella stated that the gendarmes subjected him to acts of physical abuse and released him the next day after the intervention of his colleagues. Tella said he filed a complaint with the Prosecutor General's Office, and the prosecutor forwarded the file to the gendarmerie legion for investigations. As of mid-October, the gendarmerie had reportedly forwarded the file to the government commissioner at the Bafoussam Military Tribunal without interrogating all suspects.

**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. According to estimates by the Human Rights Commission of the Cameroon Bar Association, there were 18,437 pretrial detainees in a total of 31,815 inmates as of September. Some of the detainees had been awaiting trial for more than five years. In some cases, the length of pretrial detention equaled, and in other cases exceeded, the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. Other factors contributing to lengthy pretrial detentions included, but were not limited to, insufficient staff, mismanagement of case files, the defendant's inability to pay court fees, and the politicization of some legal proceedings that required direction from authorities in the central government. According to estimates by ACAT Littoral, 3,500 out of the 4,000 to 4,500 inmates at the Douala-New Bell Central Prison were pretrial detainees as of January. The bar association estimates from 2021 indicated close to 60 percent of inmates nationwide were pretrial detainees.

On December 20, the Special Criminal Court found Amadou Vamoulké guilty of embezzlement and sentenced him to 12 years' imprisonment, after more than six

years of detention and more than 90 hearings. The court also ordered him to pay a 47 million CFA francs (\$76,400) fine. Vamouké, a former general manager of state-owned Cameroon Radio Television, was arrested and detained in 2016 on embezzlement charges. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared in 2020 that “the violations of the right to due process are of such gravity that they confer an arbitrary character on Vamouké’s detention.”

### **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, but the government did not always respect judicial independence and impartiality. In some instances, the outcomes of trials appeared influenced by the government, especially in politically sensitive cases. In other cases, the government explicitly instructed judicial officials and prosecutors to take specific decisions. Despite the judiciary’s partial independence from the executive and legislative branches, the president of the republic 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. The president of the republic also appoints the president and members of the Constitutional Council for a renewable period of six years.

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, applying the presumption of innocence in a selective manner. Criminal defendants have the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges, with free assistance of an interpreter if needed; the quality of interpretation often was poor. 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, often at the preliminary investigation phase, particularly in cases of individuals suspected of complicity with 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 but did not compel witnesses to testify. 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. Examining magistrates sometimes attempted to induce political opponents and suspected separatists to incriminate themselves. Defendants may appeal convictions up to the Supreme Court and may subsequently petition the president for pardon.

Courts often limited procedural rights in politically sensitive cases. Appeal hearings in the case of 39 MRC detainees in Yaoundé who, in December 2021 and January 2022 were sentenced by military courts to up to seven years in some cases, eventually opened at the Yaoundé Military Tribunal on September 15. The hearings were then postponed to October 20, at the request of MRC lawyers. There had been two previous attempts to start the appeal trials, notably on July 22 and August 17, in the absence of the detainees and their lawyers, who were unaware. According to the lead case lawyer, the appellants and their lawyers only learned about the hearings in August, when the court sent an order requesting the administrator of the Yaoundé Central Prison to produce the appellants for the July 22 hearing. As of August 31, the military tribunal in Douala had not yet forwarded appeal files to the Littoral Court of Appeal for those sentenced in Douala in December 2021.

Former Minister of Water and Energy Basile Atangana Kouna, who was in detention since 2018 in connection to the alleged embezzlement of public resources, was released on July 29, after the Special Criminal Court (TCS) dropped the charges against him. During the hearing, the TCS announced that the public prosecutor of the TCS, at the request of Justice Minister Eso, had requested a stay of proceedings because the accused returned the money to the government Treasury. Minister Eso requested the TCS to drop the charges following a July 25 letter from Secretary General of the Presidency Ferdinand Ngoh Ngoh indicating that President Biya had authorized the end of proceedings against Atangana Kouna.

## **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were no reports of newly identified political prisoners or detainees as of the end of the year. Ninety-four of those associated with the 2020 protests called for by the MRC opposition party, however, remained in detention, 29 of whom were expected to complete their imprisonment terms on September 30, including eight in Yaoundé and Mfou, Center Region, and 21 in Douala Prominent. Among the remaining detainees were MRC treasurer Alain Fogue and MRC spokesperson Olivier Bibou Nissack. While the charges for which they were convicted related to rebellion, insurrection, and destabilization of democratic institutions, there were credible allegations that the charges were incommensurate with participating or attempting to participate in peaceful protests.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found in November that the deprivation of liberty of 15 individuals detained in this case was arbitrary, including the detentions of Maurice Kamto, Albert Dzongang, Alain Fogue Tedom, Michèle Ndoki, Paul Eric Kingue, Gaston Phippe Abe Abe, Célestin Djamen Ndjamo, Sylvanus Muthaga, Jean Djieukou Mouaffi, Samiratou Matchuendem, Laure Kamegne Noutchang, Jean Bonheur Tchouefa Nouka, Mamadou Yacoubou, Christian Foulefack Tsamo, and Olivier Bibou Nissack. While many of the detainees were released, including Kamto, others remained in detention. The 10 separatist leaders, including Julius Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, whom the Yaoundé Military Tribunal sentenced to life imprisonment in 2019, remained in prison, and in September 2021, the Court of Appeals confirmed the sentence. In November, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the deprivation of liberty of these 10 individuals to be arbitrary.

## **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.

## **Property Seizure and Restitution**

There were reports that the government evicted persons from their places of residence without due process or adequate restitution. On May 14, for example, administrative authorities forcefully evicted several dozen residents from the area known as Dikolo-Bali in Douala 1 subdivision, Littoral Region, as part of a project to build a five-star hotel. Government workers and security bulldozed houses and teargassed protestors. According to the governor of the Littoral Region, some residents had received compensation prior to the eviction. On May 28, the governor set up a commission to revisit the area and see where the construction went beyond the original land perimeter, and to register the collateral victims. He also ordered the suspension of all work on the site pending the report of the commission. The report had not been made public as of the end of the year.

The populations of Kribi 3 subdivision, Ocean division of the South Region, who were evicted because of the construction of the Kribi-Lolabe highway since 2016, had reportedly not yet received full compensation as of mid-June at the time of the highway's completion and inauguration. According to media reports, the government released approximately one billion CFA francs (\$1.63 million) for compensation, but the divisional compensation commission disbursed only part of the compensation.

## **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.

Reports suggested authorities punished family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives. In 2021, the self-styled separatist "General No Pity"

who controlled a separatist base known as Marine Forces located in Ndop, Northwest Region, claimed that soldiers stormed his compound and arrested his “uncles, aunts, younger brothers, and sisters.” He gave authorities 48 hours to release the family members, threatening to wreak havoc if anything bad happened to them. While No Pity’s brother and cousin were released in August 2021, his mother and uncle remained in government custody. As of mid-September, Antoinette Kongnso, No Pity’s former girlfriend arrested in October 2021, was still being held in detention despite a December 2021 decision of the Southwest court of appeals granting her bail.

### **g. Conflict-related Abuses**

There were credible reports of abuses associated with the ongoing crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, where government forces clashed with separatists. The abuses included killings and abductions by both government forces and armed separatist groups. Furthermore, there were credible reports of abuses, including killings and abductions, committed by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA in the Far North Region.

**Killings:** There were credible reports that members of government forces and separatist fighters deliberately killed civilians. On the night of June 9, government forces killed at least two unarmed civilians during a reconnaissance operation in Belo, Boyo division of the Northwest Region. Eyewitnesses reportedly told Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) that at approximately 3:00 a.m., young men were returning home when soldiers detained them. One of the young men was identified as Gideon Alahfuchi, a former separatist fighter who was previously shot in the waist and was just recovering from his wounds. At some point during the evening, when Gideon Alahfuchi complained that he was tired, the soldiers allegedly slit his throat with a knife and dumped his corpse by the roadside. Witnesses reportedly told the CHRDA that the soldiers left Belo in approximately 10 trucks, and moved to Njinkfuin, heading towards a separatist camp situated in the village of Aboh. While at Njinkfuin, they removed a man in his 50s known as “Bo Luh” from bed and executed him after accusing him of making charms (*odeshi*) for separatist fighters.

On March 2, suspected separatists ambushed and killed Timothee Aboloa,

divisional officer (DO) of Ekondo-Titi in the Southwest Region. The attackers detonated at least four improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as the DO and several others drove toward the neighboring town of Bekora. According to Southwest Region Governor Bernard Okalia Bilai, after the detonation of the IEDs, separatists opened fire on the occupants of the vehicle. At least six other persons died in the attack. On June 14, armed separatists ambushed and decapitated two police officers in Mbuene, a village situated in Njinikom subdivision, Boyo division of the Northwest Region. According to reports, the operation was a counterattack on the defense forces, who previously conducted an operation in the village in search of separatist fighters.

Human Rights Watch reported in June that armed separatists killed at least seven persons, injured six others, raped a girl, and committed other grave human rights abuses across the country's Northwest and Southwest Regions since January.

**Abductions:** Armed separatists kidnapped several persons for not respecting the separatist-imposed lockdown measures. The separatists held persons as hostages, including public officials, political leaders, teachers, schoolchildren, and religious and traditional leaders. There were credible allegations that separatists physically brutalized their victims.

As of late June, according to credible NGOs, separatists had carried out at least 80 abductions since January. In April, armed separatists kidnapped 33 Roman Catholic seminarians for ransom in Bachuo-Ntai, Southwest Region. On April 30, in Bamenda, Northwest Region, separatists kidnapped Senator Regina Mundi, a member of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, along with her driver. The day after her abduction, a video circulated on social media showing Senator Mundi seated on a sofa in front of a "Republic of Ambazonia" poster, reading a prepared statement in which she referred to herself as "an Ambazonian by birth and nationality," and calling for Ambazonian independence. According to reports, different factions of the self-proclaimed Ambazonian Defense Forces claimed responsibility, each making its own demands for the Senator's liberation and at least one group threatening to kill her. Government defense and security forces eventually rescued Senator Mundi on May 30 (see also section 1.b., Disappearance).

As of the end of August, Fon Yakum Kevin Shumitang II, the president of the Northwest House of Chiefs, whom armed separatists abducted in 2021, remained unaccounted for. Separatists kidnapped the traditional ruler in December 2021, from his palace at Bambalang, Ngoketunjia division of the Northwest Region. Also, the whereabouts of five of the six divisional delegates, whom armed separatists abducted in June 2021 in Ndian division of the Southwest Region, remained unknown as of December.

According to bishops of the Roman Catholic Bamenda Provincial Episcopal Conference (BAPEC), on September 16, at least 30 unidentified individuals firing into the air set fire to St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Nchang, Mamfe, Southwest Region and abducted nine persons. The abductees included five priests, a nun, one catechist, and two others. The bishops attributed the attack to separatists who regularly accused the Church of not supporting the secession of the Northwest and Southwest Regions. They said since the crisis began in 2016, combatants had increasingly threatened and targeted church leaders and missionaries who were "facing a wave of persecution." During a September 21 media interview, BAPEC leader Archbishop Andrew Nkea said the kidnappers had asked for a 66 million CFA francs (\$107,000) ransom, which they later reduced to 33 million CFA francs (\$53,700). All nine abductees were eventually released on October 22.

**Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture:** According to credible reports, both government agents and separatists physically abused civilians, as well as prisoners in their custody (see also section 1.c.).

Multiple organizations reported that BIR soldier Ewome Eboko John, better known by the pseudonym "Moja Moja," arrested many civilians in the Southwest Region, accused them of being separatists, and administered harsh treatment to secure confessions. According to the organizations, Moja Moja often recorded videos of his victims as he abused them and published the videos on his Facebook page called "Moja Moja Chief." On June 27, one of the videos went viral on social media depicting Ewome beating an unarmed civilian with a metal object and forcing him to confess to being a separatist fighter. On July 12, a group of lawyers including Amungwa Nde Ntso Nico, Tamfu Ngarka Tristel Richard, and Edward Lyonga Ewule addressed a denunciation letter to the government commissioner

(prosecutor) of the Yaoundé Military Tribunal, copying the director of military justice at the Ministry of Defense. While no investigation was reportedly opened by the end of the year, one of the lawyers who signed the denunciation letter said SED officials acknowledged that Moja Moja would be investigated.

According to the *Conduct in UN Field Missions* online portal, there were three allegations during the year of sexual exploitation reported against the country's peacekeepers in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Two allegations concerned police officers and one concerned a military officer, and investigations into all three remained pending at the end of the year. Investigations into two allegations in MINUSCA from 2021, including one concerning alleged child rape, as were three investigations into allegations in MINUSCA from 2020. The country's peacekeepers have been subject to almost 50 sexual exploitation allegations since the UN began tracking sexual exploitation data in 2015. The country, however, took some steps toward greater accountability. On 19 separate occasions since 2019, the government sentenced perpetrators to prison time following substantiation of sexual exploitation allegations. During the year, the government publicly cautioned troops being deployed to the CAR to comply fully with standards of behavior.

**Child Soldiers:** There were no credible allegations that the government recruited or used child soldiers. As in 2021, there were no reported allegations that members of defense and security forces used children for intelligence gathering. 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, although no specific cases were highlighted, and no statistics were available (also see section 7.c.). Authorities continued to encourage the creation of vigilance committees.

Boko Haram continued to recruit and use child soldiers, including girls, in its attacks on civilian and military targets.

**Other Conflict-related Abuse:** As in the previous year, there were reports of violence directed against health workers and institutions and of the use of firearms around health facilities by members of security forces and armed separatists.

There were also reports of such incidents targeting schools and civilian residential areas.

On April 21, in Konye, Meme division of the Southwest Region, members of government security forces reportedly burned several houses in Matondo II village, popularly known as Number 19, following a pursuit of fleeing armed separatists.

On February 10, according to credible reports, armed separatists burned down the dormitories and administrative blocks of Queen of the Rosary College Okoyong, a girls-only Roman Catholic Church institution in Manfe, Manyu division of the Southwest Region. In April, armed separatists stormed the University of Bamenda campus in the Northwest Region, shooting in the air, causing panic among students and teachers, and leading to a stampede that injured at least five persons. Separatists reportedly attacked the university for not observing a separatist-imposed lockdown. Two months later, on July 8, separatist fighters overtook the building of the faculty of engineering and technology of the University of Buea, where students were taking exams.

On the night of June 8, unidentified men believed to be separatist fighters burned down the Mamfe district hospital, situated in Manyu division of the Southwest Region. The entire structure was destroyed, including all hospital equipment and materials. The hospital was the largest health facility in Manyu division, serving a population of more than 80,000 individuals, according to reports.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media**

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government often restricted this right, explicitly or implicitly. Private media were active and expressed a wide spectrum of viewpoints. The media landscape faced constraints on editorial independence, in part due to fear of reprisal from state and nonstate armed actors, including separatists connected to the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

**Freedom of Expression:** Government officials denied individuals or

organizations the ability to criticize or express views at odds with government policy. Authorities imposed restrictions on symbolic expressions, such as flags and political symbols. Government officials also denied citizens the ability to discuss certain matters of general interest, including expression of views concerning political transition. Individuals who criticized the government publicly or privately often faced reprisals. On several occasions, the government invoked laws requiring permits or government notification of public protests to stifle discourse.

As part of preparations for the May 20 National Day celebration, the Mfoundi senior divisional officer in Yaoundé on May 15 addressed a letter to the vice president of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), spelling out conditions for SDF's participation in the May 20 parade. These conditions included, but were not limited to, not displaying any image other than that of President Biya, not using telephones during the parade, and not displaying slogans, placards, or texts not previously approved by the civil cabinet of the presidency.

**Violence and Harassment:** Police, gendarmes, and other government agents arrested, detained, physically attacked, and intimidated journalists. The state's failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on journalists created de facto restrictions.

On May 18, Bissong Macdella Bessong, a journalist who works for *Kick442* online media, went to the Molyko stadium in Buea, Southwest Region, to cover a match of the Cameroonian Elite One soccer championship. Bissong produced a scanned copy of her accreditation from her mobile phone, but Njonje Mbua, the director of the stadium, refused her access to the stadium, saying she must produce the physical document. Mbua forced the journalist away, with the assistance of police officers. In the process, two of the policemen reportedly exerted physical violence on Bessong, including punching her and dragging her to the ground. *Kick442* online media reportedly filed a complaint which was pending before the court in Buea; there was no reported update on the case as of December.

**Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, including Online Media:** By 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 (NCC) had suspended them previously. The Ministry of Communication has supervisory authority over media and accredits media organizations, while the NCC is the regulatory and consultative body on media matters. Authorities threatened journalists, and the NCC suspended journalists and publishers for programs and views deemed at odds with government policy. In some cases, sanctioned outlets and journalists refused to implement the NCC's decisions, leading the chair of the NCC to reportedly request support from the Ministry of Territorial Administration to implement NCC decisions.

On March 14, Benjamin Mboutou, the senior divisional officer (SDO) for Wouri division, Littoral Region, summoned Cedric Noufele, then editor in chief of Equinoxe TV, to his office. Equinoxe TV promoter Severin Tchounkeu on March 16 represented Noufele at the meeting. Tchounkeu and the SDO reportedly discussed matters including the conduct of *Droit de Réponse*, a program that had Noufele as presenter. The SDO reportedly complained concerning the way Noufele handled the program, stating that he often did not give representatives of the ruling CPDM the same treatment as other panelists. Thereafter, on March 18, Littoral Governor Dieudonne Ivaha Diboua sent a letter to Tchounkeu, accusing Equinox TV of inciting public uprising against republican institutions. Referring to the *Droit de Réponse* program of February 27 on an ongoing teachers' strike, the governor claimed that one of the panelists called on parents and students to join the protest. He threatened to "apply the law" if Equinox did not change its reporting style.

In the footsteps of the governor, the NCC issued a press release drawing "the attention of media professionals to the gravity of the consequences that may arise from the dissemination of compromising information against republican institutions, and firmly reminding their authors that media excesses are a threat to public order." Like the governor, the NCC threatened to sanction what it referred to as unprofessional behavior. On April 1, the NCC suspended Severin Tchounkeu from practicing journalism and the functions of publisher for one month. The NCC also banned Noufele from practicing journalism for the same length of time, accusing him of failing to exert control over panelists during the February 27

program, thus allowing the broadcasting of conflicting comments likely to amplify a “potentially explosive” social demand. The *Droit de Réponse* program received a one-month suspension.

**Libel/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 substantial fines. Ordinary citizens may also file libel or slander suits, but the law is often applied selectively and gives privileges to senior government officials and well-connected individuals. There were no known reports of cases prosecuted under libel, slander, or blasphemy laws during the year.

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

**Nongovernmental Impact:** There were several reported cases of armed separatist groups in the Southwest and Northwest Regions explicitly inhibiting the enjoyment of freedom of expression, including for the press. However, concern for personal security and restrictions on movements imposed by armed separatists contributed to limiting freedom of expression for members of the press.

On February 14, Vision 4, a progovernment television channel, suspended Dieudonne Essomba as a consultant for its *Club d'Elites* weekly program. The decision came after Dieudonne Essomba denounced President Biya's longevity in power and questioned his physical capacity to run the country at age 89. He declared that it was the president's wife, Chantal Biya, who was leading the country. Following the program, Essomba was summoned to the territorial surveillance department on February 16, according to the daily *La Nouvelle Expression* of February 17. Essomba later returned to Vision 4.

Several organizations reported that on May 26, in Bamenda, Northwest Region, at least six heavily armed separatists attempted to kidnap Frederic Takang, the BBC's Cameroon correspondent and one of the few journalists still working in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. The separatists took Takang's belongings, including his vehicle, computer, microphone, money, and mobile phone.

Contacted by NGO Journalists in Africa for Development, Takang said separatist fighters do not allow journalists access to areas under their control. Overall, according to *La Nouvelle Expression*, fewer than 10 journalists continued working from Bamenda.

## **Internet Freedom**

Anecdotal reports indicated that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. The reports however did not highlight any specific cases.

## **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The government limited and restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. Government failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters undermined the enjoyment of freedoms of peaceful assembly and of 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 often asserted the law implicitly authorizes the government to grant or deny permission for public assemblies. The government often granted permits for gatherings on a selective basis and used force to suppress assemblies for which it had not issued permits.

Authorities typically cited security and health-related concerns as the basis for deciding to block assemblies. Progovernment groups, however, were generally authorized to organize public demonstrations.

Multiple organizations reported that on February 16, Daouda Issa, the divisional officer of Douala IV, in the Littoral Region, banned a three-day seminar hosted by Germany's Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The purpose of the seminar was to train

officials of opposition parties, the MRC and Social Democratic Front (SDF), on political communication. Close to 80 members of the MRC and SDF allegedly showed up for the training session when Daouda Issa entered the venue with gendarmes and policemen, told all attendees to step out, and threatened to arrest anyone who chose to remain. While the Friedrich Ebert Foundation was the organizer of the seminar, Daouda Issa reportedly served MRC and SDF officials with an order banning the event. The order stated that the organizers had not previously received approval for the training, which he described as “a public political demonstration likely to degenerate and disturb public order.”

On June 29, the divisional officer for Yaoundé 1, Nyandji Mgbatou Harouna, banned a conference scheduled to take place at the Franco Hotel in Yaoundé on June 30. Earlier, on June 28, the divisional officer had issued a receipt to Jean Bosco Talla, the promoter of the conference, acknowledging notification of the event. In his June 29 reversal, the divisional officer cited a risk of disrupting social order. The conference dubbed “La Grande Palabre” was expected to mobilize actors from academia, civil society, media, and politics to discuss political transition. On the day scheduled for the conference, the divisional officer arrived at the conference venue with security forces and ordered participants not to enter.

### **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 senior divisional officer, 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 substantial 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 (see also section 3, Political Parties and Political Participation). This resulted in associations operating in legal uncertainty with their activities tolerated but not formally approved.

Although the government did not officially ban any organizations, it continued to restrict the activities of some NGOs, including Doctors without Borders (MSF) and Un Monde Avenir.

On July 15, Doctors without Borders announced its decision to close project bases in Kumba and Mamfe, in the Southwest Region, beginning on August 1. The decision followed the suspension of MSF activities by authorities three months earlier, prior to which security forces arrested and detained four MSF staff members in December 2021 and January. The MSF indicated that it could not indefinitely maintain teams with no clear visibility of when it may restart activities, nor of the likelihood that its staff could work in conditions where they would not be prosecuted for providing medical assistance to those in need, including to armed separatists.

In an August 2021 release, Minister of Territorial Administration Paul Atanga Nji ordered the leadership of foreign organizations operating in the country to update their status by submitting specific documentation within a month. Although the NGO Un Monde Avenir, which regularly denounces government abuses, submitted the required file, the organization's leadership claimed their accreditation had not been renewed as of December.

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

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

### **d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country**

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, at times the government and nonstate armed groups restricted these freedoms.

**In-country Movement:** Using minor infractions as a pretext, police, gendarmes, and custom officers often extorted bribes and harassed travelers at roadblocks and checkpoints in cities and on highways. Police frequently stopped travelers to check identification documents, including national identity cards, passports, residence permits, vehicle registrations, customs status, and tax receipts as security and immigration control measures. 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 separatists restricted the movements of persons and goods in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, sometimes in a deliberate attempt to harass and intimidate the local population. Separatists often used weekly lockdowns referred to as “ghost towns” to enforce restrictions on movement, in which the armed separatists demanded all businesses, schools, and places of worship close, and residents stay home. Violent crime, including kidnapping by terrorists, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, assault, and carjacking, were major impediments to in-country movement in the three northern regions as well as in part of the East Region.

Separatists continued to enforce a lockdown of the Northwest and Southwest Regions on Mondays, as well as for other extended periods of time. During the lockdown periods, all vehicles were banned from the roads in these regions. Separatists warned that any person or group of persons contravening the ban would be punished.

**Foreign Travel:** Citizens have the right to leave the country without arbitrary restrictions. The movement of some political opponents and debtors, however, was 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. There were no credible reports of citizenship revocation on an arbitrary or discriminatory basis during the year.

## **e. Protection of Refugees**

The government generally cooperated with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. The country operated an open-door policy. This policy, however, was not implemented in a manner that allowed refugees to exercise fully their rights to freedom of movement, employment, and access to government health and educational services, as stated in various legal instruments.

**Access to Asylum:** The law provides for the granting of 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 traveling and engaging in business activities.

**Freedom of Movement:** The government did not provide documents in a timely manner to refugees and other persons in need of primary documentation, which restricted movement. During the year, authorities launched a project to deliver biometric identity cards to refugees from the CAR. UNHCR and the government continued to conduct biometric verification and registration of Nigerian refugees in the Far North Region, including those not living in refugee camps. The pilot phase of the project was launched in the East Region and was expected to secure 6,000 biometrics-based identification documents to CAR refugees living in camps there. The biometrics-based identification documents aimed to facilitate the socioeconomic integration of the refugees, including enabling holders to open and access bank accounts, and to circulate freely within the country.

**Employment:** There were no credible reports that the government imposed restrictions on refugees' ability to work after their status as refugees was official. Refugees without government-recognized documentation, however, experienced significant obstacles to employment.

**Access to Basic Services:** There were no known cases of discrimination in education and health care that occurred once a refugee's status was official. While

refugees had limited access to health care, education, and employment opportunities, their rural host communities faced similar problems. Access to these services varied according to the location of the refugees, with those in camps receiving more support through humanitarian assistance, while refugees living in host communities faced more difficulty receiving services.

**Durable Solutions:** There was no evidence that the government accepted refugees for resettlement or offered naturalization to refugees residing in its territory. The government, however, assisted in the voluntary return of persons to the CAR.

The governments of Cameroon and the CAR successfully repatriated 299 CAR refugees from the East and Adamaoua Regions on June 1. UNHCR supervised their departure from the country. According to the *Cameroon Tribune*, 6,504 refugees benefited from UNHCR support and its partners to travel back home.

In April, the government hosted a ministerial-level conference to seek durable solutions for Central African refugees in countries surrounding the CAR. The conference ended with the signing of the Yaoundé Declaration, a document calling for the creation of a coordinating body for the CAR and its six neighboring countries to work together on durable solutions.

**Temporary Protection:** The government continued to provide temporary and unofficial protection to individuals who might 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 by employers in the informal sector.

## **f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons**

According to estimates by UNHCR, the country hosted approximately two million persons of concern to UNHCR as of July, including approximately one million internally displaced persons (IDPs). In addition, the country had an estimated 555,668 formerly displaced persons, as of November 30, who had returned to their places of origin. The IDPs were mainly from the Far North, Northwest, and Southwest Regions. They were mostly driven by Boko Haram/ISIS-related insecurity and the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. Humanitarian

access remained limited because of insecurity and military officials' tight control over access to the affected areas.

### **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, although no elections were conducted during the year.

#### **Elections and Political Participation**

**Recent Elections:** In 2020, the country held simultaneous legislative and municipal elections. The next Senate elections are scheduled in 2023, while legislative, municipal, and presidential elections are scheduled in 2025.

In 2020, security concerns constrained voter participation in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. The courts annulled the legislative elections in 11 constituencies of the Northwest and Southwest Regions due to voter turnout of less than 10 percent. Legislative reruns occurred in the 11 constituencies. The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) won 152 of the 180 National Assembly seats and 316 of 360 local councils. Opposing political parties lost significant numbers of seats when compared with previous elections. Overall, eight opposition political parties won seats in the National Assembly, and nine won control of local councils. Additionally, the Constitutional Council annulled some legislative elections, citing irregularities including lack of equal access to media and campaign space, 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.

In 2018, Paul Biya was reelected president in an election marred by irregularities and against the backdrop of protracted sociopolitical unrest in the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

**Political Parties and Political Participation:** As of the end of the year, the country had approximately 330 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 state funds to promote party campaigns, interference with the right of opposition parties to register as candidates and to organize during electoral campaigns, and undue influence of traditional rulers. Traditional rulers, who received salaries from the government, openly declared their support for President Biya prior to the 2018 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 the loss of all income. 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 Members of Minority Groups:** No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities, or persons with disabilities, in the political process and members of many of these groups did participate. No laws explicitly limited the participation of LGBTQI+ persons; they did not openly participate in the political process, and observers surmised that social stigma and the criminalization of same-sex conduct deterred LGBTQI+ persons from openly participating.

## **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. The law identifies different offenses as corruption,

including influence peddling, involvement in prohibited employment, and failure to declare a known conflict of interest. Reporting corruption was encouraged through exempting whistleblowers from criminal prosecution. In addition to the laws, the National Anti-corruption Agency (CONAC), Special Criminal Court (TCS), National Financial Investigation Agency, Ministry in Charge of Supreme State Audit, and Audit Bench of the Supreme Court also contributed to fighting corruption. CONAC, the most prominent of the anti-corruption agencies, was constrained by the absence of any legislative or presidential mandate. There were reports that senior officials sentenced to prison were not always required to forfeit their ill-gotten gains.

**Corruption:** As in the previous year, there were new allegations of corruption involving public officials. The TCS continued prosecuting corruption cases. While hearings continued in some high-profile cases, the court opened new cases and issued decisions in other ones. It dropped charges in at least one ongoing case.

In May, the UK-Swiss commodity firm Glencore confessed before a London court to paying \$28 million in bribes to secure preferential access to oil in five African countries, including Cameroon. Following the guilty plea, members of the political opposition, civil society, independent media, and anti-corruption NGOs, including Transparency International, urged the country's anti-corruption institutions to open an investigation into the issue, which relates to the operations of the National Hydrocarbon Corporation (SNH) and the National Refining Company (SONARA). The leadership of SNH and SONARA denied the allegations. CONAC announced on July 7 that it had opened a corruption investigation into the matter. As of December, there were no reported developments concerning the investigation.

On August 22, the TCS found Niwa Long Othon, a former manager of the National Civil Engineering Equipment Pool-MATGENIE (2009-17), and his administrative and financial director, Simon Crépin Zambo, guilty of the embezzlement of public property in the amount of 1.37 billion CFA francs (\$2.23 million). The TCS sentenced them to 20 years' imprisonment each and ordered them to pay back the funds allegedly misappropriated, plus damages.

As of the end of September, there were no reported developments regarding the

outcome of the judicial proceedings that President Biya ordered in 2021 concerning the management of COVID-19 spending. The 2021 investigation into the spending, popularly known as “Covidgate,” highlighted shortcomings including opacity in the awarding of contracts, overruns of allocated budgets, embezzlement, and overbilling. A dozen officials reportedly appeared before the commission during the investigation conducted by the Audit Chamber of the Supreme Court. Following the audit report, Minister of Communication Rene Emmanuel Sadi reported in May 2021 that President Biya had ordered judicial proceedings to be conducted by the TCS. Anecdotal reports emerged in late August that the TCS interrogated at least one senior government official in connection with the COVID-19 spending, but as of December, there were no reported developments on the issue.

The trial of the former Defense Minister Edgar Alain Mebe Ngo that opened at the Special Criminal Court in 2020 continued; the court had not issued any decision as of September. Mebe Ngo stood accused of embezzling 236 billion CFA francs (\$429 million) as part of the purchase of military equipment for the army.

## **Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

Several domestic and international human rights groups investigated and published findings on human rights cases. Government officials rarely were cooperative and responsive to their views. Government officials impeded many local human rights NGOs by harassing their members, limiting access to prisoners, refusing to share information, and threatening violence against NGO personnel. The government took no action to investigate or prevent such occurrences.

**Retribution against Human Rights Defenders (HRDs):** Since Territorial Administration Minister Paul Atanga Nji in August 2021 instructed associations operating in the country to update their status within a one-month deadline or be suspended, some organizations were having difficulties renewing their accreditations. As in the previous year, human rights defenders and activists received anonymous threats from persons suspected to be affiliated with the

government by telephone, text message, and email. On January 15, for example, Philippe Nanga, the coordinator of Un Monde Avenir, received a WhatsApp message that read: “Tell my friend Philippe Nanga that after the African Cup of Nations, Paul Biya will no longer be constrained by speeches on human rights. The state will conduct systematic cleaning.”

On March 14, Glede Bruno, the director of judicial police in Yaoundé, summoned NGO Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC) executive director Maximilienne Ngo Mbe to report to the judicial police on March 23 to discuss the legal status of REDHAC. Glede reminded Ngo Mbe that in the event she failed to report to police as requested, she would be compelled to do so by all legal means. Barrister Alice Nkom and other lawyers represented Ngo Mbe at the judicial police. After referring to the movement of funds in REDHAC’s accounts, the police officer questioned barrister Nkom on suspicions of money laundering, embezzlement of resources, and nonenrollment of REDHAC staff members to the National Social Insurance Fund. Police had taken no further action as of October. (Also see section 2.b., Freedom of Association.)

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The mission of the CHRC, established in 2019, is to promote and protect human rights and prevent torture in detention facilities. The commission operates hotline No. 1523, which serves to denounce human rights abuses, including cases of torture. The CHRC is a government-funded institution. The CHRC may also receive support from national and international partners, as well as donations. The CHRC coordinated actions with NGOs, participated in some inquiry commissions, and issued statements on topical human rights matters.

## **Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses**

### **Women**

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** The law criminalizes rape of both women and men 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 survivors often did not report them. The law does not address spousal rape, nor does it specifically prohibit domestic violence, although assault is prohibited

and punishable by imprisonment and fines.

Unlike in 2021, there were no known or officially reported allegations that persons associated with the government raped women and children. Reports, however, suggest that domestic violence was a major issue.

On June 26, according to credible sources, a soldier shot and killed his girlfriend, Nchinda Ophilia, also a soldier, following a heated argument. As of early October, there was no publicly available information concerning investigations into the killing.

The government provided support to survivors of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence, including legal support to survivors via the judiciary network, general clinical care offered in health facilities, and collection of data through the District Health Information System and provision of situational analysis. Many of the prevention and basic support programs for survivors of gender-based violence were implemented by community-based organizations.

**Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C):** The law protects the bodily integrity of persons and prohibits genital mutilation for all women, including women ages 18 and older and girls younger than 18. 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 if the practice causes death. According to estimates from UN Women, however, the prevalence of FGM/C among girls and women aged 15 to 49 years was 2 percent.

**Other Forms of Gender-based Violence:** Widows were sometimes forcibly married to one of their deceased husband's relatives, especially in rural communities, to secure continued use of property left by the deceased husband, including the marital home. 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 were subject to certain trials such as bathing in public or movement restrictions, was prevalent in rural communities of the West Region. Anecdotal reports suggested breast ironing, the process of forcibly flattening emerging breasts in pubescent girls, continued to exist in some rural communities, but in very small numbers.

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

**Reproductive Rights:** There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

In most parts of the country, prenatal clinics monitored and assisted women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provided parents with the best chance of having a healthy infant. Women also had access to emergency care, including services for the management of complications arising from abortion regardless of whether abortion was legally permitted.

The Ministry of Public Health offered counseling services to women during prenatal visits, promoting the concept of responsible parenthood and encouraging couples to use contraception to space the timing of their children. Many women, however, lacked the means to manage their reproductive health, and societal pressures continued to reinforce taboos on discussing reproductive health within certain communities. Women's dependence on receiving their husbands' consent continued to be a barrier in contraceptive decisions. Also, women in some rural areas or from poor families received limited skilled health-care attendance at birth, in part due the distance between health facilities.

The government did not readily provide emergency contraception for survivors of sexual violence. In the past, the UN Population Fund provided a kit with emergency contraception to some clinical sites as part of clinical care for gender-based violence survivors.

In July, the government passed a law regulating medically assisted procreation (MAP). The practice had been ongoing for several years in the country but had no legal framework. The law restricts MAP to married couples or those able to prove

a common-law marriage. To benefit from MAP, a person must be at least 21 years old, and not older than 55 for women. The law also affirms the legality of consensual third-party surrogacy in the case of egg or sperm donation, while expressly forbidding the trade or sale of reproductive material. The penalty for such an infraction would range from a nominal fine to imprisonment.

Menstruation and limited access to sanitary products affected girls' access to education. Pregnancy and motherhood often impeded adolescent girls' access to education, but there were no studies assessing the magnitude of the problem. As a measure to encourage pregnant girls to remain in school, Nalova Lyonga, the Minister of Secondary Education, in May issued a release allowing confirmed pregnant students to continue with school activities until the 26th week of pregnancy, after which she may request to be placed on maternity leave.

**Discrimination:** The constitution provides women and men the same legal status and rights. The government, however, often did not enforce the law. 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.

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

The constitution states in its preamble that the state shall protect "minorities and preserve the rights of Indigenous populations in accordance with the law," but it does not mention specific categories that qualify as minorities or Indigenous populations. The laws and regulations on decentralization and elections also protect the rights of minorities by requiring that lists of candidates reflect the sociological landscape of constituencies, or that the office of president of a regional council or city mayor be held by a native of the constituency. The government made efforts to enforce these provisions, but some forms of

discrimination and violence persisted.

While there were no reliable reports of governmental or societal violence or discrimination against members of racial, ethnic, or national minorities, there were reports of violence along ethnic lines during the year, although it was not always clear whether ethnicity was the primary reason for the violence.

During the night of June 25, in the village of Bakinjaw, Manyu division of the Southwest Region, at least 32 persons died in an intercommunal clash between the Oliti and Messaga Ekol communities. It began at the home of a local member of Parliament, Aka Martin, where several persons were gathered for the funeral of his late brother. Unidentified assailants stormed the home and set fire to the house and the coffin containing the remains of the brother. Residents reportedly identified the assailants as members of the Oliti community, accompanied by armed mercenaries. In a June 27 statement, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon referred to the incident as a further development in an interethnic conflict that began in April as a land dispute between the Oliti and Messaga Ekol communities. The Oliti community, the moderator recalled, attacked and killed members of the Messaga Ekol community on their farms on April 29, and the Messaga Ekol community retaliated. The Oliti community then secured the backup of hired armed men and launched an attack on the Messaga Ekol community, burning several houses and killing more than 30 persons. In a June 8 statement, Ministry of Defense Spokesperson Cyrille Atonfack Guemo suggested that the attack was perpetrated by separatists.

On July 24, armed individuals abducted four members of the Fulani community from their homes in Wum, Mentchum division of the Northwest Region. The next day, residents discovered the corpses of the abductees. As a result, some Fulani men on July 26 reportedly launched an offensive to avenge the deaths, leaving several wounded. While some sources attributed the killings to separatists, others said the incident was a further development in the protracted farmer/herder conflict in this community.

## **Indigenous Peoples**

Taking as basis the criteria for identifying Indigenous populations contained in the

International Labor Organization Convention 169 and the *Report of the African Commission's Working Group on Indigenous Populations/Communities*, the groups that may be considered Indigenous in the country are the Mbororo and the Baka. 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 persons' 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. Nonetheless, most Baka did not have these documents, and efforts to reach them were impeded by the difficulty in reaching homes deep in the forest. In December, the National Assembly passed legislation exempting the Baka from the minimum height requirement for military service, a requirement which heretofore prevented Baka from serving in the armed forces.

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. The Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (BOSCUDA) indicated that the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions negatively affected the Mbororo community. According to the association program coordinator, the Mbororo adopted a neutral position when the crisis started and consequently face regular attacks by separatists for not supporting independence. Farmers reportedly targeted the Mbororo, stealing their cattle, especially in Donga and Mantung division of the Northwest Region. BOSCUDA's program coordinator said that at least 812 Mbororo had been affected by the crisis in one way or the other as of April 20. Among them, 192 had been killed, 127 kidnapped, 266 houses burned, 2,256 cattle seized or killed, and 184.74 million CFA francs (\$300,000) spent in ransom payments.

## **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 provided on a nondiscriminatory basis, but many births went unregistered because children were not always born in health facilities. Also, many parents faced problems in reaching local government offices. A diagnostic study and the complementary evaluation of the civil status system conducted in 2016 revealed that the low level of birth registration was due to a multitude of factors, including administrative obstacles linked, among other things, to the nonfunctioning of civil status centers or their remoteness from the populations. In addition, existing regulations that established the free declaration and registration of births were not respected in health facilities and in civil registration centers. Ignorance of laws and regulations and the neglect of the populations also contributed to inadequate birth registration. Children without birth certificates were unable to register for official examinations to enter secondary school or secure other legally required identity documents.

Offices of Civil Affairs were located within municipal councils in each subdivision, and in many rural or remote areas, they were in civil status centers. In some jurisdictions, parents would need to travel more than 15 miles to find an operational civil administrative office. Parents have until 90 days after a child is born to register the birth. After that time, a birth may only be registered by appealing to the local district prosecutor. To adjudicate and notarize official birth documents, a family would be expected to pay 15,000 to 25,000 CFA francs (\$24-\$41) and face bureaucratic obstacles, which most families from rural communities would struggle to afford, forcing many parents to abandon the process early. The president of the court sets the price to execute summary judgments, and the price for the execution varied by division and region.

On April 12, the government daily *Cameroon Tribune* published an interview with the minister of decentralization and local development, who indicated that approximately four million persons in the country do not have birth certificates. The minister urged stakeholders to support an operation aimed at large-scale issuance of birth certificates. Citing the National Civil Status Office (Bunec) as its source of information, the privately funded *Oeil du Sahel* newspaper reported on August 29 that 400,000 children in the Far North Region missed school during the 2021-22 school year because they did not have birth certificates. The newspaper

further indicated that for the 2022-23 school year, Bunec identified 1,600,000 children attending schools without birth certificates.

**Education:** The law provides for tuition-free compulsory primary education up to the age of 12. The law punishes parents with sufficient means who refuse to send their child to school with a fine. Children were generally expected to complete primary education at 12 years of age. Secondary school students had to 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 (see also section 6, Women, Reproductive Rights).

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, separatists ordered boycotts and attacked schools in the Southwest and Northwest Regions that continued to disrupt normal school operations.

Several teachers were killed or kidnapped during the year. On June 17, members of a nonstate armed group abducted Sunjo Noline and Nasuru Nsodzeka, two teachers on duty at the Kumbo government high school, Northwest Region. The teachers were encouraging the resumption of classes and providing home-based refresher courses to students in physics and chemistry. In a statement issued on May 13, Virginia Gemba, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, indicated that more than 700,000 children were out of school because of the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions (see also section 1.g., Other Conflict-related Abuse). The beginning of the 2022-23 school year was constrained by the insecurity in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, where armed separatists imposed a lockdown and perpetrated attacks on civilians who challenged it (also see section 6, Other Societal Violence or Discrimination).

In an article published in *La Nouvelle Expression* on June 22, Joseph Ateba Abena, on behalf of NGO Journalists in Africa for Development, highlighted the case of unschooled Indigenous peoples. According to the article, the schools were abandoned and the teachers, when they existed, were neither trained nor remunerated by the state. The author of the article asserted that apart from the

isolated actions of the Ministry of Social Affairs, there was no clear government policy that encouraged the schooling of Indigenous children. Moreover, the teachers at the schools did not receive any pedagogical training recognized by the country's educational system, and their remuneration came from voluntary contributions and civil society organizations, not formally from the government. According to the coordinator of the Association for the Promotion of Persons with Disabilities, the Elderly and Orphans of Cameroon, a human rights organization based in the Noun division of the West Region, children with special needs had limited access to education compared with other children. More often, he said, parents of children with disabilities did not send the children to school.

**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. Despite these legal provisions, child abuse remained a problem. Children continued to receive 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.), and adults sexually assaulted children.

Tomorrow's Children, an NGO based in the Noun division of the West Region, reported that farmers exploited IDP women and children in their plantations, where they abused them sexually. The organization also mentioned the case of a girl who was raped by her classmates at the bilingual government school Koutaba in December 2021. The rapists were reportedly in detention as of April 20.

In its report during the year on monitoring domestic violence, the NGO Nouveaux Droits de l'Homme highlighted several cases of violence against women, sometimes involving children as victims. On March 20, in Douala, for example, a former host of the television show *Jambo* on Canal 2 International reportedly raped his daughter, whose age was estimated at 14. Canal 2 reportedly suspended him from the program; by mid-August, the father had not been charged with a crime.

**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 ages 20 to 24 were married before age 18 and 11 percent were married before age 15. Early and forced marriages, as well as abusive "temporal

marriages,” were more prevalent in the northern part of the country and some parts of the West Region, especially in the Noun division.

**Sexual Exploitation of Children:** The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation and the sale, offering, or procuring for child sex trafficking and practices related to child pornography. Authorities enforced laws against child pornography. The country’s legal framework requires a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offense and therefore does not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The law does not set a minimum age for consensual sex. According to anecdotal reports, traffickers exploited children younger than 18 in sex trafficking, although no statistics were available. Anecdotal reports suggested the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions had contributed to a dramatic increase in child sex trafficking and increased number of early pregnancies, especially in areas with IDPs. Reports suggested the Bonaberi neighborhood in Douala was a hub for the sexual exploitation of underage IDP girls (also see section 7.c.).

**Infanticide, Including Infanticide of Children with Disabilities:** Although infanticide is illegal, there were isolated reports of attempted infanticides. The daily *La Nouvelle Expression* reported on April 14 that on the night of April 8, in Banekane, a locality of Nde division, West Region, an IDP named Emmanuella (surname unknown) gave birth to a baby that she immediately buried alive. Neighbors found the infant alive 48 hours later and rushed it to a clinic in Bagangte for appropriate care. Emmanuella, already a mother of three children, explained that she lacked the means to care for the newborn.

**Displaced Children:** Many displaced children continued to live on the streets of urban centers, although the number was in decline because of stringent security measures and a law that criminalizes vagrancy. According to estimates of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there were 2,170 separated children and 1,790 unaccompanied children in the Far North Region as of 2020, including IDPs, returnees, out-of-camp refugees, and other migrants (see also sections 2.e. and 2.f.).

Thousands of children were affected by the humanitarian crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. These children were vulnerable to abuses of their rights

by armed forces and nonstate armed actors alike. In 2021, according to IOM data from August, there were approximately 769 unaccompanied and 8,320 separated children in the Northwest and Southwest Regions among the displaced population. These children faced many problems, including limited access to school, health care, protection, and risk of being recruited into armed groups. The government had not established structures to ensure that internally displaced children were protected from recruitment by nonstate armed groups and terrorist organizations.

## **Antisemitism**

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

## **Trafficking in Persons**

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

## **Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics**

**Criminalization:** Consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults is illegal and punishable with imprisonment from six months to five years plus a fine. The government enforced the law. While there is no law criminalizing LGBTQI+ identity, police often detained LGBTQI+ individuals based solely on their perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, including individuals detained who had sought law enforcement assistance after being the victims of violent crimes.

**Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons:** LGBTQI+ human rights organizations such as the Cameroonian Foundation for AIDS, Humanity First Cameroon, Alternatives-Cameroon, the National Observatory of the Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons and Their Defenders, Colibri, Working for Our Wellbeing, and others continued to report arbitrary arrests of LGBTQI+ persons. LGBTQI+ individuals continued to face significant stigma, violence, and discrimination from their

families, communities, and the government, including law enforcement personnel (see also section 1.c.).

In a May press release, Human Rights Watch indicated that since March 9, security forces had arrested at least six persons and detained 11, all of them victims of group attacks, for alleged consensual same-sex conduct and gender nonconformity. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) release stated that on April 10, a crowd of approximately eight men armed with machetes, knives, sticks, and wooden planks, attacked a group of at least 10 LGBTQI+ persons attending a party at a private home in Yaoundé. A local official reportedly took two of the victims to the gendarmerie for protection from the mob, but instead the gendarmes beat the victims and only released them after payment of 15,000 CFA francs (\$24). The other victims remained in the hands of the violent crowd for at least two hours, which injured and robbed them of their money and mobile phones. A human rights organization advocating for LGBTQI+ persons stated that it had recorded several dozen other cases of violence and abuse against members of the LGBTQI+ community across the country as of August.

During the year, there was a new development in the November 2021 case where a violent mob sexually assaulted, beat, and threatened an intersex person while others filmed the attack in two videos which later circulated on social media. A man allegedly connected to the attack was arrested and released 48 hours later. In November 2021, an organization advocating for LGBTQI+ persons filed a complaint with police on behalf of the survivor. Police opened a fresh investigation into the incident, leading to the arrest of and subsequent prosecution of a suspect. On February 25, the court of first instance at the Yaoundé administrative center found the accused guilty and sentenced him to six-month imprisonment plus a fine of 650,000 CFA francs (\$1,060).

**Discrimination:** The constitution prohibits discrimination and prescribes equal rights for all citizens; however, the law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics; the law does not specifically recognize LGBTQI+ individuals, couples, or their families. Security forces sometimes harassed, detained, and assaulted persons based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including individuals found with condoms and lubricants. Fear of exposure affected

individuals' willingness to access HIV and AIDS health services.

**Availability of Legal Gender Recognition:** No laws or decrees allow individuals to change their gender identity marker on legal and identifying documents to bring them into alignment with their gender identity. The option of identifying as “non-binary/intersex/gender non-conforming” is not available.

**Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically**

**Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals:** The law is silent on such practices.

Anecdotal reports however indicated some members of the LGBTQI+ community were victims of “corrective rape” to have them change their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:**

Although the law does not specifically prohibit their registration, LGBTQI+ organizations were not permitted to officially register as such and thus registered either as general human rights organizations or as health-focused organizations. Many LGBTQI+ organizations reported that operating health programs, particularly HIV prevention and treatment programs, shielded them from potential harassment or shutdown, rather than promoting advocacy for LGBTQI+ persons as their primary mission.

**Persons with Disabilities**

Persons with disabilities could not access education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. 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 challenges. Under the 2010 law, 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. The government did not always provide information

and communication on disability concerns in formats that were accessible to persons with disabilities.

The constitution protects the rights of all persons. There were no reports of police or other government officials inciting, perpetrating, or condoning violence against persons with disabilities during the year. Persons with disabilities faced discrimination in employment and occupation (see section 7.d.).

Many 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 Yaoundé Special School for Hearing-Impaired Children. NGOs, including Noun division-based Association for the Promotion of Persons with Disabilities, the Elderly and Orphans of Cameroon, however, indicated that parents of children born with disabilities seldom sent the children to school.

On June 27, at approximately 6 a.m., police arrested more than twenty visually impaired persons while they were peacefully demonstrating in front of the Prime Minister's Office in Yaoundé. Those arrested were detained for several hours at the central police station number 1. While the alleged intention of the demonstration was to denounce poor living conditions and the difficult access to employment for persons with disabilities, authorities stated the demonstration was illegal. A spokesperson for the protesters reportedly told Radio Equinoxe reporters that three visually impaired journalists were selected for the last direct recruitment into the public service, but no one was eventually confirmed after the interviews. He cited the 2010 law on the promotion of persons with disabilities, which stipulates that for equal qualifications, the person with a disability has priority. They said they believed they were also marginalized during recruitment in private companies, even though many of the applicants are university graduates. Persons with disabilities did not receive adequate protection in conflict zones. The government took no action to limit the rights of persons with disabilities to participate in civic life; however, access constraints may have limited participation to certain activities, such as voting in elections.

## **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. At approximately 2:00 a.m. on August 22, unidentified individuals set fire to a dormitory at Presbyterian Secondary School (PSS), Mankon in Bamenda, Northwest Region, days before the August 24 reopening for final-year students. School authorities told media that the arsonists fired several shots in the air before leaving the campus. The incident was the third arson attack on PSS Mankon since the beginning of the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. The attack followed an August 13 viral communiqué by separatists who announced that classes would only resume on October 4 and threatened reprisals against any schools that attempted to reopen earlier. The separatists expressed their opposition to the resumption of classes in state-owned schools and declared private, denominational, and community-run schools could reopen, provided they did not use school uniforms, sing the national anthem, or teach French. The arson attack on PSS Mankon took place hours after an August 21 call by bishops of the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province for classes to resume in the Northwest and Southwest Regions without any preconditions (also see section 6, Children, Education).

Persons with HIV often suffered social discrimination and were isolated from their families and society, in part 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.

## **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 may be fined. Unions are prohibited from carrying out any activity that is not related to the study, defense, development, and protection of the interests of workers.

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 obligate employers to bargain. 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 are exhausted. Workers who ignore procedures to conduct a strike may be dismissed or fined. Free industrial zones are subject to labor laws, but there are several exceptions limiting worker rights. Within free industrial zones, employers have the rights to determine salaries according to productivity, which could bypass minimum wage requirements, to negotiate work contracts free of some labor law regulations, and to issue work permits for foreign workers without the normally lengthy government oversight process. Some laws intended to target terrorists may impose harsh legal penalties on legitimate trade union activity.

The government and employers did not effectively enforce the applicable laws on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Penalties for violations were rarely applied against violators and were not commensurate with

those for comparable violations. Administrative and 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.

Many employers continued to use subcontractors to avoid hiring workers with collective bargaining rights. Major companies, including quasi-state-run and state-operated companies, reportedly engaged in the practice, according to workers from Energy of Cameroon, the water supply company Camerounaise des Eaux, cement manufacturer Cimencam, Guinness, Aluminum Smelter, Cameroon Oil Transportation Company, 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.

The International Trade Union Confederation cited the country's Terrorism Suppression Law, as limiting civil liberties in the country, including legitimate trade union activities. The International Labor Organization (ILO) noted in 2021 that the law's definition of terrorism could apply to acts related to the legitimate exercise of activities by trade unions or employers' representatives.

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

As an example of a successful negotiation, teachers organized under the collective "On a Trop Supporté" (OTS) launched a nationwide strike on February 21 to demand better working conditions and restitution for unpaid wages and benefits. Representatives of OTS reportedly submitted a strike notice to the Prime Minister's Office in February, demanding payment of their outstanding allowances and bonuses. In March, the secretary general of the Presidency announced the disbursement of emergency funding to address the outstanding balance reportedly owed to teachers who graded official exams for academic years 2020 and 2021. OTS then called on colleagues to resume duty, saying that the collective would

trust the good faith of the government and temporarily suspended the strike to avert an education crisis.

The government took some actions to repress trade union activity. In June, security forces arrested four leaders of transport sector trade unions and placed them in administrative custody in Yaoundé. They were accused of incitement to rebellion, criminal association, disturbance of public order, and conspiracy against the Republic. These representatives of cab drivers, intercity drivers, and other transporters had planned a sit-in in front of the Prime Minister's Office to denounce the increase in the price of the vehicle inspection. In their strike notice, they also urged their colleagues to demonstrate against illegal transporters who compete with them and against the abuses of agents of the Ministry of Transport on the highways. The four union leaders were released on June 14. Prior to the arrest, on March 23, police occupied the premises of the Labor Exchange (Bourse du Travail), located in the Messa district of Yaoundé, to prevent a planned press conference by the transport sector union leaders.

Government officials also took police action against a planned work stoppage. In a June 29 communiqué, the president of the National Union of Public Sector Researchers urged researchers to suspend, effective June 30, activities such as scientific supervision of students and trainees in research institutes under the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation. In response to the strike notice, officials deployed a strong police presence on June 30, effectively taking control of the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation to prevent any labor stoppage. The government justified its action by citing the labor code requirement for arbitration to precede any strike action.

## **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 other serious 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, labor inspection and

remediation, and regular conflation of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. 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. Anecdotal reports of hereditary servitude 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.

Unconfirmed but credible 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.

The ILO noted in 2021 that under the country's law, compulsory prison labor may be imposed for expressing certain political views or opposing the established political, social, or economic system.

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**

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, sexual orientation, and gender identity, especially in the private sector, although no statistics were available (see section 6). There were legal restrictions on women's employment in occupations deemed arduous or "morally inappropriate" and in industries including mining, construction, factories, and energy. Women made up 90 percent of the labor force in the informal sector. 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. Refugees could obtain legal authorization to work in the formal sector; however, formal sector employers rarely hired authorized refugees. There were no confirmed reports of discrimination against internal migrant or foreign migrant workers, although unconfirmed credible 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.

In June, a group of visually impaired persons staged a demonstration in front of the Prime Minister's Office in Yaoundé, to denounce what they considered discrimination regarding their access to employment. (See section 6, Persons with Disabilities.)

### **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

**Wage and Hour Laws:** 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.

**Occupational Safety and Health:** The government sets occupational safety and health (OSH) standards in the workplace. The minister in charge of labor establishes the list of occupational diseases in consultation with the National Commission on Industrial Hygiene and Safety. Ministry inspectors and occupational health physicians are responsible for monitoring OSH standards.

**Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement:** The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for enforcement of the minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. The ministry did not enforce the laws and regulations in the informal sector. In the formal sector, penalties for violations of the law were not commensurate with those for comparable crimes, such as negligence. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. Unconfirmed but credible reports suggest some businesses did not provide health services to their employees, as required by law but rarely enforced. The government more than doubled the total number of labor inspectors, but the number was still insufficient, and the ministry lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program.

**Informal Sector:** The International Labor Organization reported that informal workers made up 90 percent of the labor force in the country, and that most were women. Sectors where informal employment was most prevalent included artisanal mining, petty trade, hunting and fishing, and handicraft. The informal economy was mostly unregulated, and consequently was not covered by wage, hour, OSH, and other labor laws and inspections. Although self-employed workers could voluntarily contribute to one type of government old age pension scheme, workers in the informal labor market were largely uncovered or ineligible for social protection schemes like unemployment or workers compensation for injury.