

Cameroon 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were positive and negative changes in the human rights situation in Cameroon during the year. There was a decline in civilian fatalities due to improved respect for human rights by government security forces in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. At the same time, there were reports of increased government restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious abuses in a conflict; unlawful recruitment or use of children in armed conflict by the government and nonstate groups; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and enforcement of or threat of criminal or civil laws in order to limit expression; and systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

The government took some credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

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

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were several reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary and unlawful killings during the year.

On May 12, Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) officer Chief Sergeant Sanda fired shots indiscriminately at civilians in a nightclub in Limbe, Southwest Region, according to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Mandela Center International, killing one individual and wounding several others. Police apprehended Sanda and detained him at a gendarmerie brigade. Mandela Center International reported witnesses stated Sanda claimed he acted in retaliation for the killing of his colleague by separatists.

On June 19, two civilians died in an explosion after BIR soldiers allegedly compelled them to deactivate an improvised explosive device (IED) with their bare hands in Melim, Kumbo, Northwest Region, according to media. The soldiers earlier stopped all traffic after detecting the IED, apparently placed on the road by separatists, and reportedly forced the two individuals, both passersby, to assist in deactivating it. When the two men came in

contact with the device, it detonated and immediately killed them.

Witnesses reported the soldiers sent everyone away and abandoned the corpses on the road. The government denied the incident occurred as reported and that the BIR compelled any civilians to deactivate IEDs.

Journalists and NGOs reported arbitrary and unlawful killings of civilians by nonstate armed groups in conflicts that continued in the Northwest, Southwest, and Far North regions.

b. Coercion in Population Control

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

c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide

There were reports government forces and separatist fighters deliberately killed numerous civilians. Although independent observers accused government forces of killing unarmed civilians, officials claimed those killed by government forces in conflict zones were in fact separatists. Separatists also attacked and killed government workers and civilians alleged to have assisted government forces or who did not observe separatist-imposed lockdowns.

Mandela Center International and media reported that on April 11, security

forces looking for separatists in the villages of Banka/Bamfem in Bui Division, Northwest Region, killed six unarmed civilians whom they accused of collaborating with separatists. According to media, the soldiers in Bamfem were avenging the death of their colleagues ambushed by the Bui Warriors nonstate armed group.

According to media, Boko Haram and ISIS-WA carried out attacks in the Far North Region and killed many civilians. In its situational report for May, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs stated terrorists killed 43 civilians and abducted eight others in Mayo Sava, Mayo Tsanaga, and Logone-et-Chari divisions.

On February 11, the detonation of an IED in the Northwest Region town of Nkambe killed a girl, aged 15, and injured more than 70 persons. Lucas Ayaba Cho, the Norway-based leader of the separatist Ambazonia Governing Council and its armed wing, the Ambazonia Defense Forces (ADF), claimed responsibility for the attack; he stated the group was targeting a member of parliament and had imposed a lockdown on communities during the annual celebration of Youth Day. Authorities announced three persons were arrested in connection with the bombing. The government cooperated with Norway as it arrested separatist leader Cho in September and charged him with “incitement to crimes against humanity.”

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government often explicitly or implicitly restricted this right. Government authorities issued statements and broadly interpreted laws relating to antiterrorism, public order, disinformation, and hate speech to punish dissent and encourage self-censorship of otherwise protected speech.

Government officials reportedly denied individuals or organizations the ability to criticize or express views at odds with government policy.

Government officials also denied citizens the ability to discuss certain matters of general interest, including expression of views concerning political transition. There were reports individuals who criticized the government privately or in public faced reprisals.

According to Human Rights Watch, on June 21, gendarmes in Ngaoundere, Adamawa Region, arrested Aboubacar Siddiki, known as Babadjio, a member of the National Union for Democracy and Progress party, on charges of disturbing public order, demonstration, and hate speech. Siddiki's arrest took place shortly after he was released from prison following a previous arrest on March 8 for which he served a three-month sentence for insulting the regional governor of Adamawa on a WhatsApp group. His lawyer stated

the June 21 arrest was based on claims by the intelligence service that Siddiki's supporters were planning to demonstrate to celebrate his release. On June 24, his lawyer filed a habeas corpus petition before the Ngaoundere High Court, but Siddiki remained in detention at year's end.

Blasphemy was a criminal offense. There were no known cases prosecuted under the blasphemy law during the year.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Police, gendarmes, and other government agents reportedly arrested, detained, physically attacked, and intimidated journalists. Journalists and publishers reported cases of telephone harassment and intimidation. Journalists practiced self-censorship, refraining from subjects that could be perceived as critical of the government due to harassment and intimidation by the government.

In August political commentator Aristide Mono, a regular critic of the government, alleged security and intelligence agents in Douala twice attempted to detain him. Mono reported he received an administrative summons from authorities in Douala and was reluctant to leave his residence in Yaoundé for fear of being abducted or killed, as had happened to other journalists in the past. Mono accused the government of harassing and intimidating him because he drew public attention to the absence of good governance and social justice and criticized the government. Mono

reported the incidents to government security agencies in Yaoundé and resumed travel to Douala, but reported continued harassment from local officials.

On August 20, three unidentified individuals physically assaulted Emmanuel Ekouli, a Reporters Without Borders correspondent and Publisher of *Voice of the Center* newspaper in Etoudi, Yaoundé as he returned home from work. According to Ekouli, the assailants pulled Ekouli off a motorbike and repeatedly punched and kicked him until he lost consciousness. Ekouli sustained multiple injuries. He had been similarly targeted on July 9 when three individuals on a motorbike hit him with a club and stole his identification and professional documents in Ngoussou, Yaoundé. Media interpreted the attacks as an attempt to intimidate Ekouli, whose reporting was viewed as overly critical by certain political figures.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

By law the Ministry of Communication required editors to submit two signed copies of their newspapers within two hours of publication, although the government did not enforce and publishers did not comply with this requirement. The Ministry of Communication had supervisory authority over media outlets and accredited audiovisual media organizations; the central government also accredited print media. Journalists and media

outlets reported practicing self-censorship, especially if the nominally independent media regulator, the National Communication Council (NCC), had suspended them previously. The NCC suspended journalists and publishers based on public complaints and for content deemed at odds with government policy. The NCC invoked “professionalism” and “social responsibility” to sanction protected speech. In February, June, and August the NCC sanctioned media professionals from 11 outlets, with penalties ranging from a total ban of the outlet to three months’ suspension from the practice of journalism. Prominent among the sanctions was a one-month suspension of an Equinoxe Television program and its presenter, Duval Fangwa Gnakwa, for broadcasting “unfounded statements and insults” about the territorial administration minister. On August 11, three days after the suspension, Equinoxe Television broadcast a similar political program, leading the NCC to accuse Equinoxe of attempting to circumvent the sanction and place an immediate ban on the replacement program for the duration of the original one-month suspension. On September 4, the NCC president announced he would permanently shut down any media outlets that did not comply with NCC rules.

There were several reported cases of armed separatist groups in the Southwest and Northwest Regions inhibiting freedom of expression, including for the press. In addition, concern for personal security and restrictions on movement imposed by armed separatists further limited freedom of expression for media members.

Efforts to Preserve the Independence of the Media

In August and September the NCC president led a “sensitization” tour of media outlets in Yaoundé and Douala aimed at engaging with editors in chief, moderators, and media proprietors on journalists’ social responsibility and best practices in conducting interactive programs, live talk shows, and debates. The tour served as an opportunity for media practitioners to share their experiences and raise their concerns with the NCC.

The government provided cash grants to private media outlets that met certain criteria as part of efforts to promote a sustainable media that advanced democracy among other values. Some NGOs described the aid as being grossly insignificant.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the rights of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct strikes, but with significant restrictions. These rights did not apply to certain groups of workers, including defense and national security personnel, prison administration civil servants, and judicial and legal personnel. The law also prohibited antiunion discrimination and required the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. Statutory limitations and other practices substantially restricted

these rights. According to union leaders, the law prohibited the creation of a union that included both public- and private-sector workers or the creation of a union that included different sectors, even if closely related. The law required that unions register with the government, have a minimum of 20 members, and formalize the union by submitting an application comprising the constitution and bylaws to the registrar of trade unions and employers' associations who issued a certificate of registration to the union within one month. If there was no response from the registrar within the one-month deadline, the union was considered registered. Founding members were also required to have clean police records. Those who formed a union and carried out union activities without registration were subject to fines. Unions were prohibited from carrying out any activity that was 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 were not permitted to join a foreign occupational or labor organization without prior authorization from the minister of territorial administration, who was responsible for "supervising public freedoms."

The constitution and law provided for collective bargaining between workers and management as well as between labor federations and

business associations in each sector of the economy. The law did not obligate employers to bargain. The law did not apply to the agricultural or informal sectors, which included most of the workforce.

Legal strikes or lockouts could be called only after conciliation and arbitration procedures were exhausted. Workers who ignored procedures to conduct a strike were subject to dismissal or fines. Free industrial zones were subject to labor laws, but there were several exceptions limiting worker rights. Within free industrial zones, employers had the right to determine salaries according to productivity, which enabled them to pay salaries lower than the minimum wage, to negotiate work contracts free of labor law regulations, and to issue work permits for foreign workers without the normally lengthy government oversight process.

The government and employers often 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 less than those for analogous violations such as civil rights violations. Administrative and judicial procedures were infrequent and subject to lengthy delays and appeals.

Many employers reportedly used subcontractors to avoid hiring workers with collective bargaining rights. Major companies, including quasi-state-run and state-operated companies, engaged in the practice, according to workers from Eneo, the water supply company Cameroon Water Utilities

Corporation, 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.

Several strikes were announced during the year. Some were called off after successful negotiations; others were carried out peacefully, and others faced some degree of repression. In August dock workers at the Douala seaport staged two protests, blocking entry into the port and preventing activity. The workers claimed poor working conditions and demanded salary increases and better insurance and health coverage for themselves and their families. Following negotiations, on August 22, the minister of labor and social security presided over the signing of a collective agreement between the dockers' unions and employers that provided for salary increases of up to 48 percent, among other benefits. A government-led joint commission on industrial relations mediated the dispute.

As trade unions expanded in the informal sector, the government negotiated collective agreements in the hospitality and sanitation sectors, as well as with local government workers, who were in a legal grey zone regarding workers' rights. The government also agreed to increase fares for

taxis at the demand of taxi drivers who organized after a February fuel price increase.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

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

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

On February 21, the government increased state workers' salaries by 5 percent, following an increase in the price of fuel on February 3. The government did not increase the minimum guaranteed wage in the private sector, despite calls for an increase from trade unions.

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 an 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 women refugees were particularly vulnerable to unfair labor practices.

The law established 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 were 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 mandated at least 24 consecutive hours of rest weekly.

Occupational Safety and Health

The government set generally appropriate occupational safety and health (OSH) standards in the workplace. The minister of labor and social security established a list of occupational diseases in consultation with the National Commission on Industrial Hygiene and Safety. Ministry inspectors and occupational health physicians were responsible for monitoring OSH standards. The government did not proactively identify unsafe conditions and rarely initiated labor inspections that could expose unsafe working conditions. Workers were sometimes unable to remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and some unions complained about the prevalence of “abusive dismissals.”

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security was responsible for enforcement of the minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws but did not do so effectively.

Labor inspectors were permitted to conduct unannounced inspections and attempted to do so when they had derogatory information regarding a business. Unannounced visits were sometimes thwarted due to a lack of political will in some sectors, like mining, the target business's lack of cooperation, and, in some instances, physical threats from business employees. Penalties for violations of the law were less than those for comparable crimes, such as fraud or negligence. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. Credible reports suggested some businesses did not provide health services to their employees, as required by law but rarely enforced. The total number of labor inspectors was insufficient, and the ministry lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program. During the year, the state-owned National Mining Corporation implemented a public awareness campaign to reduce child labor in mines.

The International Labor Organization reported informal workers made up 90 percent of the labor force in the country. The government did not enforce labor laws and regulations in the informal sector.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities during the year.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of persons to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court and receive compensation for serious injuries resulting from illegal detention. The government did not always respect these provisions.

The law provided that a terror suspect could be held indefinitely in investigative detention with the authorization of the prosecutor.

Administrative authorities, such as governors and civilian government officials serving in territorial command, also could approve detentions of individuals without charge for renewable periods of 15 days. Police and gendarmes reportedly often exceeded prescribed detention periods.

The law prohibited incommunicado detention, but such cases reportedly occurred, especially in connection with those accused of being or supporting separatists in the Northwest and Southwest regions. Judges reportedly did not often release defendants on bail.

Police, gendarmes, military officials, and other government authorities reportedly arrested and detained persons arbitrarily without warrant, often holding them for prolonged periods without charge or trial and at times incommunicado. The bases for their arrests and detentions were often only revealed weeks or months later.

On September 8, security forces reportedly indiscriminately arrested hundreds of persons in the Nitop, Metta Quarters, Noble Man, and Mancho neighborhoods in Bamenda, Northwest Region and detained them at the Bamenda Central Police Station. Authorities accused the detainees of being separatists or of being the relatives of separatists whom they were unwilling to denounce. Victims told media they each had to pay 5,000 CFA francs (\$8) to secure their release, with those unable to raise the money remaining in detention. Security officers also reportedly confiscated money and belongings, and extorted detainees for return of their motorbikes.

The law provided for a maximum of 18 months' detention before trial, but many detainees waited years to appear in court. While the law provided that defendants should be released on bail in all but the most serious crimes, the Bar Association estimated 75 percent of pretrial detainees, approximately 14,300 persons, were accused of misdemeanor offenses, with juveniles particularly affected. Lawyers and NGOs from multiple regions of the country reported lengthy pretrial detentions were mostly due to endemic corruption, with judges and security officers using the threat of lengthy police custody or prison detentions to demand bribes that many detainees could not pay. Other factors contributing to lengthy pretrial detentions included insufficient court staff, mismanagement of case files, inability to pay court fees, improper denial of bail, and the politicization of some legal proceedings that required direction from the central government.

In September independent journalist Kingsley Fumunyuy Njoka, in pretrial detention since his 2020 arrest, was sentenced to 10 years in prison. He was originally arrested for articles he wrote about the security crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions and was ultimately charged with crimes of secession and “complicity with armed gangs.”

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

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

e. Trafficking in Persons

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

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, but anecdotal reports and survivor testimony suggested government officials employed them. Human rights NGOs reported security forces often targeted Anglophone citizens with warrantless arrest and detention and subjected them to abuse

in order to extract information or confessions. Often such detainees were released without being charged with a crime.

In April soldiers of the 21st Motorized Infantry Battalion (BIM) allegedly tortured an individual at their base in Buea, Southwest Region after other persons accused him of involvement in an armed robbery, according to the victim's lawyer and other reports. According to the victim, the BIM soldiers searched his home and checked his cell phone but did not find any evidence of his involvement. The victim stated the soldiers tied his hands and feet, poured hot water on him, waterboarded him, and beat him with a machete, inflicting severe wounds on his hands, arms, and legs. After detaining him for two months, the soldiers released him. They forced him to confess on video that he was a separatist and attempted to prevent him from reporting what they had done to him, the victim stated. According to the victim's lawyer, the gendarmerie started investigating the case and took statements from the BIM officials who claimed they were working under the instruction of senior officials. The lawyer stated that as of September 4, the senior officials had not responded to requests to testify from the investigators. The investigation remained pending at the end of the year.

Journalists and NGOs reported nonstate armed groups engaged in physical abuses against civilians in conflicts that continued in the Northwest, Southwest, and Far North regions.

On January 6, media reported on and circulated footage of the alleged

torture of Ngang Musongong, an employee of the Moyoka municipal council, Southwest Region, by separatists who identified themselves as members of the ADF. The footage portrayed Musongong bound and covered in blood as his captors accused him of being a traitor to the separatist cause and a government collaborator.

The government took steps to identify, prosecute, and punish some abusive officials, but impunity remained a serious problem, particularly within the Department of Military Security (SEMIL) and the gendarmerie. In October following the circulation on social media of a 2019 video depicting four plain clothed individuals who were allegedly members of the SEMIL beating singer and activist Simon Longkana Agno (known as “Longue Longue”) with a machete, the Ministry of Defense released a statement condemning the incident and announcing an investigation. Such action, however, was not consistent and the outcomes of investigations and other proceedings were rarely disclosed to the public.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

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>.

Child Soldiers

The Secretary of State determined Cameroon had governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces that recruited or used child soldiers in support roles during the period of April 2023 to March 2024. See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

The government hosted, with UN participation, a national workshop to formalize a protocol for the transfer and care of children affiliated with armed groups. The government also adopted a roadmap to implement educational and mental and psychosocial services for children and to offer vocational training opportunities. The chair of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission indicated he raised concerns of children serving in military support roles with key Ministry of Defense stakeholders who committed to investigating and addressing the issue.

Media, civil society organizations, and others reported Boko Haram recruited and used child soldiers, including girls, in attacks on civilian and military targets. Some community groups, known as vigilance committees, were reported to use and recruit children in armed operations against Boko Haram and other nonstate armed groups. Separatists in the Southwest and Northwest regions recruited and used child soldiers in combat roles and to gather intelligence, according to observers.

Child Marriage

The minimum legal age for marriage was 18, but the law was not enforced effectively. UNICEF's 2018 child marriage data revealed 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 "temporary marriages" – in which couples agreed to be married for fixed periods of time and which was used to mask child prostitution and forced labor – were more prevalent in the northern part of the country and some parts of the West Region, especially in the Noun Division.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government generally cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees, but implementation of this system was weak. UNHCR provided 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 employment activities.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

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

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

There were credible reports the government exacted reprisal against individuals outside its sovereign borders.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence

On July 19, Gabon security forces arrested Cameroon national Steve Akam, also known as Ramon Cotta, a critic of the Cameroon government, who frequently posted on social media. Cotta's lawyers announced that although they believed Cotta had been transferred to Cameroon authorities, they had received no formal communication regarding the matter and did not know of his whereabouts for more than four weeks. On August 20, Cotta was brought before the Yaoundé Military Tribunal, according to his lawyers. Cotta told his lawyers he had been interrogated multiple times by government officials, and asserted he was tortured on one occasion. Cotta reported government agents beat him and exposed him to bright light from a projector, causing damage to his eyes. Cotta's lawyer stated he had been

charged with terrorist acts, financing of terrorism, insurrection, arms trafficking, and insulting the head of state and members of government. In October he was remanded to custody for a renewable six-month term while awaiting trial. The lawyer initiated a habeas corpus appeal to seek Cotta's release. Cotta remained in detention at year's end.