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2009 Human Rights Report: Cameroon

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

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Cameroon, with a population of approximately 18 million, is a republic dominated by a strong presidency. The country has a multiparty system of government, but the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) has remained in power since it was created in 1985. The president retains the power to control legislation or to rule by decree. In 2004 CPDM leader Paul Biya won reelection as president, a position he has held since 1982. The election was flawed by irregularities, particularly in the voter registration process, but observers concluded that the election results represented the will of the voters. The 2007 legislative and municipal elections had significant deficiencies in the electoral process, including barriers to registration and inadequate safeguards against fraudulent voting, according to international and domestic observers. Although civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces, security forces sometimes acted independently of government authority.

Human rights abuses included security force torture, beatings, and other abuses, particularly of detainees and prisoners. Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening. Authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained citizens advocating secession, local human rights monitors and activists, persons not carrying government-issued identity cards, and other citizens. There were incidents of prolonged and sometimes incommunicado pretrial detention and infringement on privacy rights. The government restricted freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association, and harassed journalists. The government also impeded freedom of movement. Other problems included widespread official corruption; societal violence and discrimination against women; female genital mutilation (FGM); trafficking in persons, primarily children; and discrimination against indigenous people, including pygmies, and homosexuals. The government restricted worker rights and the activities of independent labor organizations. Child labor, hereditary servitude, and forced labor, including forced child labor, were problems.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed politically motivated killings; however, there were reports that security forces committed unlawful killings. There were also some incidents of officers using excessive force; however, the government rarely prosecuted the officers responsible.

On October 28, Captain Jean Pierre Kagombe, a commander in the Upper Plateaux Division, West Region, shot and killed Jean Baptiste Kamgaing, a craftsman, following an identity check. According to press reports, Kagombe and Kamgaing were drinking together at a bar. Kamgaing left first. Shortly afterward, Kagombe and a gendarmerie patrol came across Kamgaing and requested his identification papers. Astounded by the request, Kamgaing told Kagombe that they had just been in the bar together; Kagombe, who was drunk, pulled his gun and killed Kamgaing. According to the police administration, however, Kamgaing refused to abide by the law and tried to run away. When caught, he tried to seize the captain's gun and was shot accidentally. An investigation was underway at year's end.

On November 15, Olivier Villot Ehongo, a second grade police officer and second deputy to the public security commissioner of Bafia, Mbam, and Inoubou Division, Center Region, shot and killed his wife Martine Virginie Ehongo, a magistrate and assistant to the Bafia prosecutor, following a dispute linked to jealousy. On December 1, the Delegate General for National Security (DGSN) suspended Ehongo for three months, pending disciplinary and legal actions. Ehongo eluded capture following the incident and was still wanted by police at year's end.

The government took no action regarding security force killings during the February 2008 riots, which spread to 31 localities including Yaounde and Douala, and the subsequent government crackdown. While the government reported 40 persons killed, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as La Maison des Droits de l'Homme, stated that security forces killed over 100 persons (see section 2.b.).

Unlike in 2008, there were no reports of prisoner deaths related to security force abuse during the year.

On July 16, the Mfoundi High Court in Yaounde postponed indefinitely the trial of defendants charged with the 2006 killing of Gregoire Diboule, allegedly by Ni John Fru Ndi, chairman of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), and 21 other SDF officials who belonged to a competing party faction. The decision followed three previous postponements by the court during hearings held on March 5, March 26, May 28, and June 11.

During the year societal violence and summary justice against persons suspected of theft continued to result in deaths. These acts of mob violence were seldom prosecuted by the government. For example, the press reported 18 deaths from mob violence, including beatings and burnings, an increase from the 13 deaths reported in 2008.

In early May citizens in Douala beat and killed a thief attempting to break into a house. No arrests took place after the attack.

On August 19, the citizens in the Kamkop II neighborhood of Bafoussam burned a thief to death for the alleged theft of a rooster. Again, there were no arrests or charges against the perpetrators.

Mob violence was largely due to public frustration over police ineffectiveness and the release without charge of many individuals arrested for serious crimes.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances during the year.

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

The constitution and law prohibit such practices; however, there were credible reports that security forces tortured, beat, harassed, and otherwise abused citizens, prisoners, and detainees, although there were fewer such cases than in previous years. The government rarely investigated or punished any of the officials involved.

There were reports that security forces detained persons at specific sites where they tortured and beat detainees. Security forces also reportedly subjected women, children, and elderly persons to abuse.

On January 22, newly recruited soldiers beat approximately two dozen residents of Nsoh (Bafut), in the North West Region after an altercation between the soldiers and a taxi driver. The divisional officer promised that the authorities would take action, but an investigation was still pending at year's end.

On September 17, Douala police officers beat and tore the shirt off of Freddy Nkoue, a cameraman working for Canal 2 International, a Douala-based private television channel. The incident occurred outside the Douala court, where the cameraman was covering the trial of two opposing Union of the Peoples of Cameroon factions. The International Federation of Journalists denounced the "aggression." However, Nkoue did not file charges.

In a March 2008 interview Joseph Lavoisier Tsapy, a lawyer in the West Region and a member of the Liberty and Human Rights League, described the treatment that security forces inflicted on individuals arrested during the February 2008 riots. He stated that security forces repeatedly stripped, beat, and dumped detainees into ashes from burned tires and broken glass, resulting in numerous injuries (see section 2.b.). At year's end the Liberty and Human Rights League and other human rights organizations, in association with the parents and families of the victims, were still compiling information for a formal complaint, in part due to difficulty in identifying the perpetrators.

No action was taken against security force officials responsible for the beating of Bernard Songo, a student from the University of Douala arrested during the 2008 riots, who reported that police officers severely beat him and two co-detainees in the judicial police precinct cells. Journalists covering the trial reported that evidence of the beatings was visible on the victims' bodies.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions remained harsh and life threatening. Prisons were seriously overcrowded and unsanitary. In 2008 the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (NCHRF) reported that the daily food ration per prisoner was less than 100 CFA francs (21¢). Deficiencies in health care and sanitation, which were common in all prisons, remained a serious issue.

During a May visit to Douala's New Bell Prison some detainees claimed prison authorities brutalized them. In addition, guards and local NGOs reported inmates raping each other.

Numerous international human rights organizations and some prison personnel reported that torture was widespread, but most reports did not identify the victims for fear of government retaliation or because of ignorance of, or lack of confidence in, the judicial system.

In New Bell Prison and other nonmaximum security penal detention centers, prison guards inflicted beatings, and prisoners were reportedly chained or at times flogged in their cells. For example, in May, during a visit to the New Bell Prison, foreign government officials found that disobedient and violent prisoners were chained in a tiny disciplinary cell.

Allegations were also made that authorities administered beatings in temporary holding cells within police or gendarme facilities.

Security forces reportedly subjected prisoners and detainees to degrading treatment, including stripping them, confining them in severely overcrowded cells, denying them access to toilets or other sanitation facilities, and beating them to extract confessions or information about alleged criminals. Pretrial detainees reported that prison guards sometimes required them, under threat of abuse, to pay "cell fees," a bribe paid to prison guards to prevent further abuse.

In addition, during a February 2008 visit to the Yaounde Kondengui Central Prison, Divine Chemuta Banda, the Chairman of the NCHRF learned that many of the SDF militants incarcerated in 2006 in connection with the death of Gregoire Diboule had been treated inhumanely and denied medical care. The NCHRF referred the matter to authorities, who agreed to address the issue.

During the year the government purchased four trucks for the Yaounde and Douala prisons. In its 2008 human rights report released in October, the Ministry of Justice stated that the government began construction of four prisons in Bangem, South West Region, Ntui and Ngoumou, Center Region, and Bengbis, South Region. The government refurbished or renovated 12 old prisons in seven regions including the central prisons of Ngaoundere, Garoua, and Maroua in the three northern regions. The government also completed construction of the nursery in the Yaounde Kondengui Central Prison.

Prisoners were kept in dilapidated, colonial-era prisons, where the number of inmates was as much as four to five times the intended capacity. Overcrowding was exacerbated by the large number of long pretrial detentions. Some NGOs released a report claiming that cells meant for 30 or 40 persons held more than 100 detainees. The NCHRF reported that in 2008, the government held 23,000 inmates in detention facilities originally built for 16,000 detainees. At year's end the Ministry of Justice reported that the government held 24,000 inmates in detention. Douala's New Bell Prison, built for 800 inmates, housed 2,813 inmates. The Buea prison, built for 200 inmates, held 420 detainees, and the Kumba prison, built for 200 inmates, held 481 persons.

In September the media covered a report from the nurse of the Maroua Central Prison in the Far North Region denouncing the dramatic overcrowding of the Maroua Central Prison, which was originally built for 350 inmates and held more than 1,000 detainees.

The Yaounde Kondengui Prison, originally built for an approximately 700 inmates, held 3,500 prisoners in September 2008, according to a statement by its administrator. In October 2008 penitentiary authorities in Bamenda publicly stated that 700 detainees occupied a prison initially intended to hold less than 50 prisoners.

Prisoners' families were expected to provide food for their relatives in prison. New Bell Prison contained seven water taps for approximately 2,813 prisoners, contributing to poor hygiene, illness, and death.

Health and medical care were almost nonexistent in prisons and detention cells located in gendarmeries and police stations. There were reports that prisoners died due to a lack of medical care. In September a nurse from the Maroua Central Prison submitted a report to the prime minister that 40 prisoners died as a result of inadequate medical care and nutrition. In response, the government completed the renovation of the prison and increased the food budgets.

Unlike in the previous year, no prisoners died as a result of inmate abuse. In 2008 prisoners in the New Bell Prison tried to lynch Ahmend Aliou, who subsequently died in his cell because prison wardens did not provide medical assistance. No action had been taken against prison officials by year's end. In a 2008 report, the Action of Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT), an NGO that regularly visits prisoners, characterized New Bell Prison as "hell on earth."

Individuals incarcerated in the New Bell Prison for homosexual acts suffered discrimination and violence from other inmates.

Corruption among prison personnel was widespread. Prisoners bribed wardens for special favors or treatment, including temporary freedom.

There were two separate prisons for women. There were also a few pretrial detention centers for women; however, women routinely were held in police and gendarmerie complexes with men, occasionally in the same cells. Mothers

sometimes chose to be incarcerated with their children, while their children were very young or if they had no other child care option. The secretary of state in charge of penitentiary administration acknowledged this was a serious problem and in September 2008 at a training session on detainee rights said that, "Cameroonian prisons should no longer be perceived or managed as places of repression, torture, or various other abuses."

Juvenile prisoners were often incarcerated with adults, occasionally in the same cells or wards. There were credible reports that adult inmates sexually abused juvenile prisoners. For example, during a visit by foreign government officials to New Bell Prison, a juvenile asked to go to the area with adults. The warden reminded him that adults abuse juveniles in that area.

Pretrial detainees routinely were held in cells with convicted criminals.

Some high-profile prisoners, including officials imprisoned for corruption, were separated from other prisoners and enjoyed relatively lenient treatment.

Authorities held adult men, juveniles, and women together in temporary detention centers, where detainees usually received no food, water, or medical care. Overcrowding was common. Detention center guards accepted bribes from detainees in return for access to better conditions, including permission to stay in an office instead of a cell. Detainees, whose families were informed of their incarceration, relied on their relatives for food and medical care.

In the North and Extreme North regions the government continued to permit traditional chiefs, or Lamibe, to detain persons outside the government penitentiary system, in effect creating private prisons. Many citizens turned to the Lamibe for dispute resolution. Within the palaces of the traditional chiefdoms of Rey Bouba, Gashiga, Bibemi, and Tcheboa, there were private prisons that had reputations for serious abuse. For example, those incarcerated were often tied to a post with chains attached to their wrists and ankles.

In 2007 there was a report that a Lamido (traditional and religious rulers in the northern regions) used law enforcement officials to extort money and confiscate cattle from citizens. Authorities held these citizens without access to an attorney for days or weeks, and then sent them to trial in Garoua, where the charges would routinely be dismissed.

The government permitted international humanitarian organizations access to prisoners. Both the local Red Cross and the NCHRF made infrequent, unannounced prison visits during the year. The government continued to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit prisons.

The government made nominal improvements during the year and allocated more funds to correct food deficiencies.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention; however, security forces continued to arrest and detain citizens arbitrarily.

On February 13, police from Douala 1 Central Precinct arbitrarily arrested dozens of young women in the streets of Akwa and Bonanjo neighborhoods, alleging that the women were prostitutes. Some of the women were prostitutes, many were simply walking down the street. On February 17, police released all the women.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The national police, the National Intelligence Service (DGRE), the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Territorial Administration, and, to a lesser extent, the Presidential Guard are responsible for internal security. The Ministry of Defense, which includes the gendarmerie, the army, the army's military security unit, and the DGRE, are under an office of

the presidency, resulting in strong presidential control of security forces. The national police include the public security force, judicial police, territorial security forces, and frontier police. The national police and the gendarmerie have primary responsibility for law enforcement. In rural areas, where there is little or no police presence, the primary law enforcement body is the gendarmerie.

Individuals reportedly paid bribes to police and the judiciary to secure their freedom. Police demanded bribes at checkpoints, and influential citizens reportedly paid police to make arrests or abuse individuals involved in personal disputes. Police were ineffective, poorly trained, underpaid, and corrupt. Impunity remained a problem, in spite of efforts by the government to punish those who abuse their authority. However, police officers involved in illegal activities were increasingly sanctioned during the year.

Citizens viewed police as ineffective, which frequently resulted in mob justice (see section 1.a.).

In 2008 the president signed decrees creating police stations and appointing police personnel in the Bakassi area, a region returned from Nigeria in August. In 2007 Mebe Ngo'o, then-DGSN, created new mobile police units and precincts in Yaounde and Douala to improve professionalism and increase police visibility.

During the year investigations resulted in sanctions against 12 police officers. However, authorities sanctioned fewer police officers for corruption, falsification of official documents, abuse of authority, use of excessive force, extortion of money, arbitrary arrest, blackmailing, and aggravated theft than in 2008.

On January 14, Mebe Ngo'o suspended police officer Charles Bernard Atangana Fono, the assistant to the special commissioner for Nyong and So'o Division, Center Region, for three months without pay for extortion of money; legal action was pending at year's end.

Also on January 14, Mebe Ngo'o suspended Police Inspector Martin Merimee Loh of the Mbanga, Littoral Region, and police officer Joel Medou Obam, for extortion of money and indiscipline; legal actions were pending at year's end.

On September 11, Emmanuel Edou, the DGSN appointed on June 30, suspended Second Grade Police Officer Michel Bekolo Angoula of the special police precinct of Kadey Division, East Region, and Police Inspector Vally Ghislain Mvondo Mbia of the Department of Border Police, for three months without pay for indiscipline and extortion of money; legal action was still pending at year's end.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment While in Detention

The law requires police to obtain an arrest warrant except when a person is caught in the act of committing a crime; however, police often did not respect this requirement in practice. The law provides that detainees must be brought promptly before a magistrate; however, this frequently did not occur. Police legally may detain a person in connection with a common crime for up to 24 hours and may renew the detention three times before bringing charges; however, police occasionally exceeded these detention periods. The law permits detention without charge by administrative authorities such as governors and senior divisional officers for renewable periods of 15 days. The law also provides for access to counsel and family members; however, detainees were frequently denied access to both legal counsel and family members. The law permits bail, allows citizens the right to appeal, and provides the right to sue for unlawful arrest, but these rights were seldom exercised.

Police and gendarmes arrested persons on spurious charges on Fridays at mid-day or in the afternoon although the number of such cases had decreased. While the law provides for judicial review of an arrest within 24 hours, the courts did not convene on weekends, so individuals arrested on a Friday typically remained in detention until Monday at the earliest. Police and gendarmes made such "Friday arrests" after accepting bribes from persons who had private grievances. There

were no known cases of police officers or gendarmes being sanctioned or punished for this practice. Security forces and government authorities reportedly continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain persons, often holding them for prolonged periods without charges or trial and, at times, incommunicado.

In May the Douala New Bell Prison held approximately 50 persons transferred from administrative detention for two months. The Prefet of Wouri Division, Littoral Region, ordered their administrative detention, following their arrest during a neighborhood sweep.

During the February 2008 riots, security forces arrested 1,671 persons around the country according to March 2008 figures released by the Ministry of Justice (see section 2.b.). NGOs claimed the number was higher and reported that security forces arrested scores of onlookers not directly involved in demonstrations or rioting. More than 500 bystanders, who were previously detained, have since been released. However, approximately 220 people were still detained at year's end because their prison terms exceeded the presidential amnesty.

For example, in February 2008 Yaounde gendarmes arrested Andre Blaise Essama, a computer specialist, for taking pictures of the demonstrations on his way home from work. A plainclothes gendarme officer took Essama to the gendarmerie headquarters where he was interrogated and subsequently incarcerated on charges of disturbing public order and looting. Three weeks later the court released Essama due to the erroneous charges. Essama filed a complaint against the two gendarme officers, but no action had been taken by year's end because Essama was unable to fully identify his perpetrators.

On June 24, the Douala High Court confirmed the three-year prison sentence of Lapiro de Mbanga, a popular singer arrested in Loum, Littoral Region in April 2008 for inciting riots and looting and increased damages to be paid to 280 million CFA francs (\$560,000).

Police arbitrarily arrested persons without warrants during neighborhood sweeps for criminals and stolen goods, most recently on December 12 in the Douala neighborhoods of Deido and Ndokoti. Citizens are required to carry identification with them at all times and police frequently arrested persons without identification during sweeps.

Prolonged pretrial detention was a serious problem. The criminal procedure code provides for a maximum of 18 months' detention before trial. However, the NCHRF's report released during the year but covering 2008, noted that 62 percent of inmates were pretrial detainees. The report also indicated that the longest time a detainee had been in pretrial detention was nine years. In October government statistics showed that 62.48 percent of the 24,000 inmates held in the country were awaiting trial. In 2008 the Cameroon Bar Association indicated that many of these inmates had been awaiting trial for five to 10 years. The high number of pretrial detainees was due in part to the complexity of cases, judicial inefficiency, staff shortages, and corruption. The bar association linked longer detention periods to a shortage of lawyers and an inadequate tracking system that resulted in frequent loss of files.

The law specifies that, after an investigation has concluded, juveniles should not be detained without trial for longer than three months. In practice the government detained juveniles for longer periods of time. During the year there were reports that some minors in Douala, Buea, and Kumba prisons had been detained for more than a year.

In recent years there were reports that some prisoners were kept in prison after completing their sentences or having been released under a court ruling. This usually occurred when prisoners did not pay their fines.

For example, reports indicated that during the year more than 100 prisoners remained in New Bell Prison despite completing their sentences. In addition, both prisons in Buea and Kumba also held inmates who had completed their sentences.

Amnesty

In May 2008 President Biya granted amnesty to hundreds of persons convicted for their participation in the February 2008 riots as well as other detainees.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary; however, the judiciary remained subject to executive influence, and corruption and inefficiency remained serious problems. The court system is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice. The constitution names the president as "first magistrate," thus "chief" of the judiciary and the theoretical arbiter of any sanctions against the judiciary; however, the president has not filled this role. The constitution specifies that the president is the guarantor of the legal system's independence. He also appoints all judges with the advice of the Higher Judicial Council. However, the judiciary showed modest signs of growing independence. For example, in September the Supreme Court confirmed an earlier ruling against the Ministry of Culture and found illegal the minister's decision to dissolve the Cameroon Music Corporation.

The court system includes the Supreme Court, a court of appeals in each of the 10 regions, high courts, and courts of first instance in each of the country's 58 divisions.

On March 29, the president signed a decree that dismissed Jean Baptiste Peyembouo, a second grade magistrate, from the judicial and legal service for dereliction of duty.

In early January the vice prime minister and minister of justice hired a consultant to update the penal code and to develop bilingual civil and civil procedure codes.

The legal system includes both national and customary law, and many criminal and civil cases can be tried using either one. Criminal cases are generally tried in statutory courts, and customary court convictions involving witchcraft are automatically transferred to the statutory courts, which act as the court of first instance. Customary law, used in rural areas, is based upon the traditions of the ethnic group predominant in the region and is adjudicated by traditional authorities of that group. Customary law is deemed valid only when it is not "repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience." However, many citizens in rural areas remained unaware of their rights under civil law and were taught that they must abide by customary laws. Customary law ostensibly provides for equal rights and status; however, men may limit women's rights regarding inheritance and employment, and some traditional legal systems treat wives as the legal property of their husbands.

Customary courts served as a primary means for settling family-related civil cases, such as matters of succession, inheritance, and child custody. Customary courts may exercise jurisdiction in a civil case only with the consent of both parties. Either party has the right to have a case heard by a statutory court and to appeal an adverse decision by a customary court to the statutory courts.

Military tribunals may exercise jurisdiction over civilians when the president declares martial law and in cases involving civil unrest or organized armed violence. Military tribunals also have jurisdiction over gang crimes, banditry, and highway robbery. The government interpreted these guidelines broadly and sometimes used military courts to try matters concerning dissident groups who used firearms. In December 2008 the president promulgated a new law that reorganized military justice and laid down rules of procedure applicable before military tribunals. For example, military criminal investigation officers may carry out house searches, visit residential premises, and make seizures only in accordance with ordinary law. Also, the state prosecutor may order the arrest and detention of persons presumed to have committed a crime or caught in the act if the case has been referred to the state prosecutor.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for a fair public hearing in which the defendant is presumed innocent. There is no jury system. Defendants have the right to be present and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner. Defendants generally were allowed to question witnesses and to present witnesses and evidence on their own behalf. Defendants had access to government-held evidence relevant to their cases and could appeal their cases. Because appointed attorneys received little compensation, the quality of legal representation for indigent clients often was poor.

In April the president signed into law a legal aid bill to facilitate judicial access for all citizens. The new law establishes legal aid commissions at the courts of first instance, high courts, military tribunals, courts of Appeal, and the Supreme Court. Furthermore, it specifies the conditions for legal aid applications, explains the effects of legal aid, and identifies the conditions for withdrawal of such aid. The bar association and some voluntary organizations such as the Cameroonian Association of Female Jurists, offered free assistance in some cases. The services were still available because the new legal aid bill was not fully implemented by year's end.

Lawyers and human rights organizations observed several violations of the criminal procedure code in the government's response to the February 2008 unrest. Some detainees in police or gendarmerie cells did not receive medical assistance or access to an attorney. Jean de Dieu Momo, a human rights lawyer, and ACAT representative Madeleine Afite publically denounced these violations. Afite stated that arrested minors received no assistance from their parents, attorneys, or human rights organizations, as the code mandates. In October and November the lawyers for Polycarpe Abah Abah, who was arrested in 2008 on corruption charges, requested that he be released because the legal period of detention without trial had expired. The court rejected the request.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of political detainees, which included citizens advocating secession through an illegal organization.

During the year the government continued to detain two individuals widely considered by human rights NGOs to be political prisoners. Titus Edzoa, former minister of health and long-time aide to President Biya, and Michel Thierry Atangana, Edzoa's 1997 campaign manager, were arrested in 1997, three months after Edzoa resigned from government and launched his candidacy for president. They were convicted on charges of embezzling public funds and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Both Edzoa and Atangana complained of irregularities in their trials and restricted access to counsel. At the end of the year the prosecutor filed new charges against both men for embezzlement.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The constitution and law provide for an independent civil judiciary; however, the judiciary remained subject to executive influence, and corruption and inefficiency remained serious problems.

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

The constitution and law prohibit such actions; however, these rights were subject to the "higher interests of the state," and there were credible reports that police and gendarmes harassed citizens, conducted searches without warrants, and opened or seized mail with impunity. The government continued to keep some opposition activists and dissidents under surveillance. Police sometimes detained family members and neighbors of criminal suspects.

The law permits a police officer to enter a private home during daylight hours without a warrant if he is pursuing a criminal suspected of committing a crime. A police officer may enter a private home at any time in pursuit of a criminal observed committing a crime.

During the year police put the houses of Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) officials and activists under surveillance, searched the houses of some SCNC leaders, and disrupted SCNC meetings in private residences. The SCNC is an anglophone group the government considers illegal because it advocates secession. The group does not have legal status as it has never filed an application to become either a political party or a legally recognized organization because the group considers illegal the government's "rule" over their "territories."

In October, in response to a 2003 complaint filed by the SCNC, the African Union Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights acknowledged serious human rights violations committed by the government against secessionist anglophones, while at the same time dismissing anglophone secessionism.

An administrative authority may authorize police to conduct neighborhood sweeps without warrants. Such sweeps at times involved forced entry into homes in search of suspected criminals or stolen or illegal goods. Security forces sometimes sealed off a neighborhood, systematically searched homes, arrested persons, sometimes arbitrarily, and seized suspicious or illegal articles. In February and March security forces conducted street sweeps in the Douala neighborhoods of Akwa and Bonandjo and arrested dozens of suspects. While security forces subsequently released some, others were kept and transferred to the prosecutor's office on various charges including theft, aggression, and evasion. Some of the recovered stolen items included electronics and cell phones.

Citizens without identification cards were detained until their identity could be established and then released. Several complained that police arbitrarily seized electronic devices and cell phones. Some registered their complaints with the police. For example, residents complained about the December 12 street sweep that took place in the Douala neighborhoods of Deido and Ndokoti. Security forces maintained there was an increase in crime and their intention was to prevent criminal activity.

There continued to be accusations, particularly in the North and Far North regions, that traditional chiefs arbitrarily evicted persons from their land. There was no further development at year's end.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the government continued to restrict these rights in practice. The government arbitrarily arrested and detained journalists. Senior members of the government and the CPDM used their positions to harass journalists and encourage their arrest and detention. The government enforced media regulations irregularly, often implementing arduous requirements selectively to regime critics. This often created an environment of self-censorship for journalists and media outlets. Government officials used expansive libel laws to persecute journalists who criticized them.

Individuals generally were able to criticize the government publicly and privately without being subjected to government reprisal. However, there were numerous instances where government officials threatened, harassed, or denied equal treatment to individuals or organizations who criticized government policies or expressed views at odds with government policy.

On January 30, a security officer arrested Roland Fube Fonwi Tita, a chemistry teacher at the English High School in Yaounde, on charges of plotting to assassinate the president and some ministers. The security official, who overheard Fube critique the president during a taxi ride with other passengers, pulled a gun and ordered the taxi driver to take them to a security office. On February 4, the prosecutor detained Fube, who was released on bail on March 3. Fube was

charged with making disparaging remarks against the president. The case remained pending at year's end because witnesses failed to appear in court.

The government published the daily newspaper the *Cameroon Tribune*. The newspaper did not report extensively on protests or political parties critical of the government, overtly criticize the ruling party, or portray government programs in an unfavorable light.

During the year approximately 200 privately owned newspapers were published; however, most appeared irregularly, primarily due to lack of funding. Only an estimated 25 were published on a regular basis. Newspapers were distributed primarily in urban areas, and most continued to criticize the government and report on controversial issues, including corruption, human rights abuses, homosexuality, and economic policies.

The government continued to disburse official funds to support private press outlets during the year. According to media reports, the government awarded funding selectively to outlets that were less critical of the government and with instructions to provide reporting favorable to the regime.

The government interfered with private broadcast, print, and radio media during the year.

Journalists continued to be arrested, harassed, and intimidated. In early July, Jean Bosco Talla, editor of the Yaounde-based private weekly *Germinal*, reported receiving anonymous threats, including a text message with references to the slain Burkinabe editor Norbert Zongo and the missing French-Canadian reporter Andre Kieffer. The threats were linked to the newspaper's decision to republish a report by the Catholic Committee Against Hunger and for Development, which questioned the origin of the president's wealth.

In addition, on December 28, in a revised ruling, the court sentenced Talla to a suspended one-year prison term, and a fine of three million CFA francs (\$6,000) for alleged libel against President Biya, who Talla claimed had betrayed a political pact with former President Ahidjo.

On June 30, gendarmes of the Djeleng gendarmerie brigade, West Region, arrested Michel Eclador Pekoua, publisher of the Bafoussam-based *Ouest Echos*, on defamation charges due to his April 15 article on the embezzlement of funds from a local bank. Two persons incriminated in the article filed a complaint against him.

Security forces in the wake of the February 2008 unrest, acting under the command of local provincial government officials, restricted press freedom by arresting, detaining, physically abusing, threatening, and otherwise harassing journalists. For example, Lewis Medjo, publisher of *La Detente Libre* who was arrested in September 2008, was still detained at year's end. His appeal trial began on December 8.

In September 2008 Michel Mombio, editor of the independent newspaper *L'Ouest Republican*, was arrested in Bafoussam and charged with fraud, attempted blackmail, and libel after he wrote an article criticizing cabinet officials. On September 8, the Yaounde First Instance Court held its fourth hearing on the case. The court's ruling on the case was still delayed at year's end.

Police arrested at least three other journalists reporting on high-level corruption during the year and detained them under similar circumstances. In total five journalists were detained during the year.

Radio remained the most important medium and reached most citizens. There were approximately 70 privately owned unofficial radio stations operating in the country, three-fourths of them in Yaounde and Douala. The state-owned CRTV broadcast on both television and radio. Private radio stations included STV, Canal 2 International, and Sweet FM. There was one private cable television network, TV+. The government levied taxes to finance CRTV programming, which allowed CRTV a distinct advantage over independent broadcasters.

The government required nonprofit rural radio stations to submit an application to broadcast, but they were exempt from paying licensing fees. Potential commercial radio and television broadcasters must submit a licensing application and pay an application fee when the application is submitted. Once the license is issued, stations must then pay an annual licensing fee, which was expensive for some stations. Although the government did not issue new broadcast licenses during the year, companies operated without them under a government policy of administrative tolerance.

On August 17, the minister of communication shut down the Yaounde-based Sky One FM Radio station after the radio refused to stop broadcasting its most popular program *Le Tribunal*, which allowed listeners to air grievances and seek assistance. The minister described the program as not conforming to the rules of journalism. Despite protests, the radio station will not receive authorization until it conforms.

The National Communications Council, whose members were appointed by the president to review broadcasting license applications, met twice during the year. In 2008 an official suspended the technical committee that reviews license applications and stated that it would not reconvene until the government reopened previously closed media outlets. Several low-power, rural community radio stations functioned with funding from the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and foreign countries. The government prohibited these stations from discussing politics.

The law permits broadcasting by foreign news services but requires them to partner with a national station. The BBC, Radio France International, and Africa1 broadcast in partnership with CRTV.

Television had lower levels of penetration than print media but was more influential in shaping public opinion. In 2008 the government closed Radio Equinox for its harsh criticism of the regime. The other five independent television stations skirted criticism of the government, although their news broadcasts sometimes focused on poverty, unemployment, and poor education, pointing to the role of government neglect and corruption. During the year the National AntiCorruption Commission organized a seminar on how to convey a positive image of the country and its rulers. Participants from the private press argued that no institution should teach them how to perform their job.

During the year CRTV management continued to instruct staff to ensure that government views prevailed at all times during their coverage.

The government was the largest advertiser in the country. Some private media enterprises reported that government officials used the promise of advertising (or the threat of withholding it) to influence reporting of the government's activities.

The government and government officials used strict libel laws to suppress criticism. These laws authorize the government, at its discretion and the request of the plaintiff, to criminalize a civil libel suit or to initiate a criminal libel suit in cases of alleged libel against the president and other high government officials. Such crimes are punishable by prison terms and heavy fines. The libel law places the burden of proof on the defendant. Government officials abused this law to keep local journalists from reporting on corruption and abusive behavior.

On January 7, the Douala First Instance Court sentenced Lewis Medjo, publisher of the Douala-based weekly *La Detente Libre*, to three years in jail and a fine of two million CFA francs (\$4,000) for allegedly spreading false news. In September 2008 Medjo was arrested after he published an article about a presidential decree on judicial terms of office. On January 9, Reporters Without Borders criticized the sentence and urged authorities to grant bail. Medjo's appeal trial began on December 8, with the final ruling expected early in the following year.

During the year only one government official filed a libel suit against a journalist. In 2008 seven government officials filed libel suits against journalists.

On July 13, the Committee to Protect Journalists wrote a letter to President Biya, expressing concern about ongoing abuses against press freedom and calling for the president to end such practices.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. According to the International Telecommunication Union statistics for 2008, approximately 3.8 percent of the country's inhabitants used the Internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

Although there were no legal restrictions on academic freedom, state security informants reportedly operated on university campuses. Professors said that participation in opposition political parties or public discussion of politics critical of the government could and in some cases had adversely affected their professional opportunities and advancement.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reported cases of security officials harassing musical entertainers for singing songs that were derogatory to government officials.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The law provides for freedom of assembly; however, the government restricted this right in practice. For example, on November 15, the sous-prefet of Yaounde I banned the extraordinary congress of the People's Socialist Party (PSP) on grounds that the party was illegal and that such activity would disturb public order. The PSP president disputed the allegations and stated that he had duly notified the sous-prefet. He showed the press the notification receipt dated November 4 from the sous-prefet.

The law requires organizers of public meetings, demonstrations, or processions to notify officials in advance but does not require prior government approval of public assemblies and does not authorize the government to suppress public assemblies that it has not approved in advance. However, officials routinely asserted that the law implicitly authorizes the government to grant or deny permission for public assembly. Consequently, the government often did not grant permits for assemblies organized by persons or groups critical of the government and used force to suppress public assemblies for which it had not issued permits.

Authorities refused to grant the SCNC permission to hold rallies and meetings, and security forces arrested and detained SCNC activists. Security forces forcibly disrupted demonstrations, meetings, and rallies of citizens, trade unions, and political activists throughout the year. Unlike in the previous year, security forces' use of excessive force did not result in deaths, although there were numerous injuries.

On May 22, after several postponements, the Yaounde First Instance Court sentenced Bernard Njonga and Jean Georges Etele to a suspended two-month prison term for three years and a fine of 26,500 CFA francs (\$53). Njonga, the president of l'Association Citoyenne de Defense des Interets (ACDIC) and ACDIC member Etele were arrested in December 2008 for disturbing public order and conducting an unauthorized rally.

No action was taken against police who in February 2008 shot and killed Lovet Ndimia Tingha, a meat vendor, while police attacked a crowd gathered for a march organized by the opposition SDF party.

There also was no action taken against police responsible for the February 2008 shooting death of Emanuel Tantoh, a demonstrator in Bafoussam, West Region.

There were no new developments in the 2007 case in which a senior divisional officer and his deputy reportedly shot and killed high school students Jean Jores Shimpe Pougou Zok and Marcel Bertrand Mvogo Awono in Abong-Mbang, East Region during a demonstration against a four-month absence of electricity in the town. The government promised an investigation.

The trial continued during the year in the 2006 case of four leaders of the Association for the Defense of Students' Interests, who were charged with rebellion and disturbance of public order.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, but the government limited this right in practice.

The conditions for government recognition of political parties, NGOs, or associations are arduous, interminable, and unevenly enforced. The process forced most associations to operate in uncertainty, in which their activities were tolerated but not formally approved.

The law prohibits organizations who advocate for any type of secession, leading government officials to disrupt meetings of the SCNC on the grounds that the purpose of the organization rendered their meetings illegal.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice.

The practice of witchcraft is a criminal offense under the law; however, individuals generally were prosecuted for this offense only in conjunction with another offense, such as murder. Witchcraft traditionally has been a common explanation for diseases of unknown cause.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were a few reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Established churches denounced new unaffiliated religious groups, most of which were Protestant, as "sects" or "cults," claiming that they were detrimental to societal peace and harmony. In practice, such denunciation did not inhibit the practice of the unaffiliated religious groups.

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

For a more detailed discussion, see the *2009 International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/drl/rls/irf.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

Although the constitution and law provide for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, security forces routinely impeded domestic and international travel during the year. The government cooperated with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and asylum seekers. On June 1, officers of a Mobile Intervention Unit posted at the Ekona checkpoint, South West Region, allegedly acting under orders, harassed and humiliated Ayah Paul Abine, a CPDM parliamentarian from South Region. Ayah, a dissenting voice in the party, spoke out against a 2008 constitutional amendment to eliminate presidential term limits. Ayah stated that this was a tactic by the government to limit his movements.

Roadblocks and checkpoints manned by security forces proliferated in cities and on most highways, where extortion of small bribes and harassment were commonplace. Police frequently stopped travelers to check identification documents, vehicle registrations, and tax receipts as security and immigration control measures. There were credible reports that police arrested and beat individuals who failed to carry their identification cards as required by law.

The right to foreign travel was generally respected.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not use it; however, some human rights monitors and political opponents departed the country because they considered themselves threatened by the government, and declared themselves to be in political exile.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Approximately 100 persons had not returned home due to previous violence between the Bali and Bawock ethnic groups over land disputes and as a result of an attack by the Oku tribe on the Mbessa tribe.

In 2005 between 10,000 and 15,000 citizens in and around the Adamaoua Region villages of Djohong and Ngaoui were displaced following attacks and looting by unidentified armed groups from the Central African Republic (CAR). Officials from the Adamaoua Region administration reported that hundreds of IDPs remained.

During the year the government worked with UNHCR to protect and assist IDPs.

Protection of Refugees

The country is a party to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Its laws provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system of providing protection to refugees. The government granted refugee status or asylum. In practice the government provided protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group, or political opinion.

The government also provided temporary protection to certain individuals who may not qualify as refugees and provided it to approximately 83,000 refugees, including 62,000 from CAR, 5,000 from Chad, and 2,971 from Nigeria.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The law provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully; however, President Biya and the CPDM party controlled the political process, including the judiciary and agencies responsible for the conduct and oversight of elections. Electoral intimidation, manipulation, and fraud limited the ability of citizens to exercise this right in past elections. In 2008 the National Assembly passed a constitutional amendment that removed presidential term limits and added provisions for presidential immunity. Although considerable national discussion of the proposal ensued, the National Assembly ultimately passed the revisions in a manner that allowed no debate and underscored the CPDM's unfettered control of all government branches. Neither the electorate nor their elected representatives had an opportunity to affect the outcome of the constitutional exercise.

Elections and Political Participation

During the 2007 legislative elections, observers witnessed poor supervision at the polling stations and lax application of the electoral law. An unnecessarily complex registration process effectively disenfranchised some voters. The government failed to implement some electoral improvements to which it was committed. For example, despite repeated public assurances, the government was unable to provide indelible ink--an internationally recognized safeguard against multiple

voting--to many polling stations. In addition, despite efforts to computerize voter registration, the lists still included numerous errors.

The Supreme Court received over 130 complaints from political parties after the elections, but disqualified the majority of them on technical grounds. However, the court ordered new elections in five constituencies for 17 parliamentary seats, which were held in 2007; the CPDM won 13 seats and opposition parties four. Observers noted some irregularities and low voter turnout.

In July 2008 the government's National Elections Observatory published its assessment of the 2007 legislative and municipal elections. The report cited shortcomings due to lack of coordination between the various electoral commissions and a lack of clear, uniform procedures for the various stages of the electoral process (especially the registration process).

In 2004 President Biya, who has controlled the government since 1982, was reelected with approximately 70 percent of the vote in an election widely viewed as more free and fair than previous elections. Although the election was poorly managed and marred by irregularities, in particular in the voter registration process, most international observers agreed that it reflected the will of the voters. The Commonwealth Observer Group, however, maintained that the election lacked credibility.

During its June 2008 electoral session, the National Assembly passed an amendment to the law that created Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), extending the deadline for the electoral body's creation from June to December. On December 30 and 31, the president signed decrees appointing all the members of ELECAM, including the president and vice president of the board. Most board members were active CPDM members. Many in the international community publicly questioned the independence and credibility of ELECAM, given the partisan nature of its council membership. However, the government claimed ELECAM could run an independent election and had begun to hire staff needed to organize an election by year's end.

Membership in the ruling political party conferred significant advantages, including in the allocation of key jobs in parastatals and the civil service. The president appoints all ministers, including the prime minister, and also directly appoints the governors of each of the 10 regions. The president has the power to appoint important lower level members of the 58 regional administrative structures as well. Onerous requirements for registration of parties and candidates restricted political activity.

The right of citizens to choose their local governments remained circumscribed. The government greatly increased the number of municipalities run by presidentially appointed delegates, who have authority over elected mayors, effectively disenfranchising the residents of those localities. Delegate-run cities included most of the provincial capitals and some division capitals in pro-opposition regions; however, this practice was almost nonexistent in the southern regions, which tended to support the ruling CPDM party. In municipalities with elected mayors, local autonomy was limited since elected local governments relied on the central government for most of their revenue and administrative personnel.

There were more than 180 registered political parties in the country. Fewer than 10, however, had significant levels of support, and only five had seats in the National Assembly. The ruling CPDM held an absolute majority in the National Assembly; opposition parties included the SDF, based in the anglophone regions and some major cities. The largest of the other opposition parties were the National Union for Democracy and Progress, the Cameroon Democratic Union, and the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon.

Authorities sometimes refused to grant permission to hold rallies and meetings.

The government considered the SCNC illegal because it advocates secession and had never registered as a political party or organization. During the year security forces preemptively arrested approximately 102 leaders, members, and supporters of the SCNC to prevent them from participating in unauthorized political meetings.

For example, on February 23, security forces in Mutenguene, South West Region, arrested 25 SCNC activists gathered in the residence of one of their national leaders. Security forces later released them.

On March 21, Bamenda police, North West Region, arrested approximately 70 SCNC activists who were meeting to discuss the UN's demarcation of the Cameroon-Nigeria border. The police released them the following day without charges.

In accordance with provisions of the 2008 penal code, officials released, pending trial, individuals who were detained for participating in illegal gatherings of the SCNC.

Women held 23 of 180 seats in the National Assembly, six of 61 cabinet posts, and a few of the higher offices within the major political parties, including the ruling CPDM.

Pygmies were not represented in the National Assembly or the higher offices of government.

Section 4 Official Corruption and Government Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption; however, the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. The World Bank's worldwide indicators reflected that corruption was a severe problem. The public perception was that judicial and administrative officials were open to bribes in almost all situations. Corruption was pervasive at all levels of government.

Judicial corruption was a problem. According to several press reports, judicial authorities accepted illegal payments from detainees' families in exchange for a reduction in sentence or the outright release of their relatives, including juveniles. Political bias by judges (often instructed by the government) frequently stopped trials or resulted in an extremely long process with extended court recesses. Many powerful political or business interests enjoyed virtual immunity from prosecution and some politically sensitive cases were settled through bribes.

There were publicized prosecutions of government officials accused of corruption during the year. Governments officials accused of corruption were held in separate quarters and received special treatment. During the year the government sanctioned dozens of government employees for corruption and mismanagement.

On March 5, Yaounde judicial police arrested and detained Paul Ngamo Hamani, the former interim administrator of Cameroon Airlines, for embezzlement of public funds. On March 10, the instructing magistrate of the Wouri High Court placed Hamani in pretrial detention. There were no developments by year's end.

On April 15, the Yaounde prosecutor detained Jerome Mendouga, a former ambassador, for embezzlement in connection with the purchase of a presidential plane. Mendouga was in pretrial detention in the Yaounde Kondengui Central Prison at year's end.

In May the government dismissed 106 gendarme officers who used fake degrees to apply to the gendarmerie corps in 2006.

On August 24, the Yaounde High Court sentenced Norbert Ndong, the former director of higher education development and former president of the organizing committee of the higher technician diploma exam, to 10 years' imprisonment and fined him approximately 142 million CFA francs (\$284,000) for embezzlement.

On August 26, the Yaounde judicial police arrested and detained Jean-Baptiste Nguini Effa, the former general manager of the government-owned National Petroleum Distribution Company, along with six of his close collaborators, for embezzlement. On the same day, the police transferred Nguini and his co-accused to Douala, where the prosecutor placed them in pretrial detention after several interrogation sessions.

On September 7, the National Assembly lifted the parliamentary immunity of Dieudonne Ambassa Zang, a CPDM deputy of Mefou and Afamba Division, Center Region, who was wanted for alleged embezzlement during his tenure as minister of public works. Ambassa Zang had not been arrested by year's end and was believed to have fled the country.

In March 2008 police arrested and detained Paulin Abono Moampamb, a former secretary of state and mayor of Yokadouma, a small town in East Region, for embezzlement of public funds. Moampamb was placed in pretrial detention, awaiting trial at year's end.

Also in March 2008 police arrested and detained Polycarpe Abah Abah, a former minister of finance, and Urbain Olangouena Awono, a former minister of public health, for embezzlement. The two men were placed in pretrial detention, awaiting trial at year's end.

In August 2008 police arrested and detained Jean Marie Atangana Mebara, a former minister of state and secretary general of the presidency, for corruption and embezzlement. Mebara was in detention awaiting trial at year's end.

There were new developments in the following 2008 high profile corruption case:

On June 11, the Douala Court of Appeals sentenced Alphonse Siyam Siwe and two other defendants for life imprisonment on embezzlement; the lower court had previously issued 30-year sentences. Among others accused in the case, one was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment, eight to 15 years', and one to one year. In addition, the court reversed the Wouri Higher Courts' acquittal of seven defendants and sentenced six to 15 years' imprisonment and one to one year.

The constitution and law require senior government officials, including members of the cabinet, to declare their assets; however the president had not issued the requisite decree by year's end.

There are no laws providing citizens with access to government information, and such access was difficult to obtain. Most government documents, such as statistics, letters exchanged between various administrations, draft legislation, and investigation reports, were not available to the public or the media.

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

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing findings on human rights cases; however, government officials repeatedly impeded the effectiveness of local human rights NGOs during the year by harassing their members, limiting access to prisoners, refusing to share information, threatening violence, and using violence against NGO personnel.

Despite these restrictions, numerous independent, domestic human rights NGOs operated in the country, including the National League for Human Rights, the Organization for Human Rights and Freedoms, the Association of Women against Violence, the Movement for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, and the Cameroonian Association of Female Jurists. The government collaborated with domestic NGOs to address child labor, women's rights, and trafficking in persons.

In February 2008 the Douala antiriot police arrested, beat, dragged on the floor, and stripped naked Aicha Ngo Eheg, a human rights activist with "Cri des Femmes," a Douala-based human rights group. Ngo Eheg, along with other demonstrators, had gathered in the Douala neighborhood of Bepanda to march against constitutional reform. According to Ngo Eheg's public statement, the police targeted her because she tried to stop them from harassing a young demonstrator. At year's end Ngo Eheg had not decided whether to file a complaint against the police.

A prominent human rights organization in Yaounde also reported that security forces ransacked its offices during the February 2008 unrest.

On February 4, the vice prime minister and minister of justice reiterated the government's commitment to respond positively to any requests that would help improve human rights in the country. The government cooperated with international governmental organizations and permitted visits by UN representatives and other organizations such as the ICRC; however, in September the government denied visas to an Amnesty International (AI) team. The visa denials occurred after the August 12 release of the annual AI report, which sharply criticized arbitrary arrest and detention and other human rights violations. Although AI was granted visas in November, a visit had not occurred by year's end.

While the NCHRF remained hampered by a shortage of funds, during the year it conducted a number of investigations into human rights abuses, visited prisons, and organized several human rights seminars for judicial officials, security personnel, and other government officials. In December 2008 the commission launched a program to teach human rights in primary and secondary schools. Although the commission rarely criticized the government's human rights abuses publicly, its staff intervened with government officials in specific cases of human rights abuses by security forces. During the year the NCHRF continued its efforts to stop "Friday arrests" (the practice of detaining individuals on Friday to prolong the time before court appearance) and sought to obtain medical attention for jailed suspects. Government officials also attended several seminars organized by the commission.

The National Assembly's Constitutional Laws, Human Rights and Freedoms, Justice, Legislation, Regulations, and Administration Committee is charged with reviewing any human rights-related legislation the government submits for consideration. During its March session, the president signed the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa as well as a bill to organize legal aid.

In October the Ministry of Justice published its own 2008 human rights report which focused primarily on enumerating government actions to address human rights issues, such as judicial and disciplinary action taken against corrupt officials.

Section 6 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law does not explicitly forbid discrimination based on race, language, or social status, but does prohibit discrimination based on gender and mandates that "everyone has equal rights and obligations." The government, however, did not enforce these provisions effectively. Violence and discrimination against women, trafficking in persons, and discrimination against ethnic minorities and homosexuals were problems.

Women

The law criminalizes rape, excluding spousal rape, although police and the courts rarely investigated and prosecuted rape cases. The media reported only 14 rape cases during the year; few of those resulted in arrests. Due to social taboos associated with sexual violence, many rapes went unreported. On June 28, the German Agency for International Cooperation, in collaboration with local NGOs, launched a national campaign against rape. The campaign followed the release of a study that reported the rapes of hundreds of thousands of young girls and women between 1970 and 2008.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, although assault is prohibited and is punishable by prison terms and fines. In December 2008 a study from La Maison des Droits de l'Homme, a Douala-based NGO, reported that approximately 39 percent of women suffered from physical violence. A 2005 survey cited by the *Cameroon Tribune* also indicated that 39 percent of women living with a man (married or unmarried) were victims of physical violence, and 28 percent were victims of psychological violence. Women's rights advocates asserted that penalties for domestic violence were insufficient. Spousal abuse is not a legal ground for divorce. On March 6, International Women's Day, the newspaper *Cameroon Tribune* published a special report on the various aspects of violence against women. The report covered FGM, which the government and civil society partners were trying to address for total eradication, physical assaults by husbands, which were numerous and which would require passing specific legislation, and psychological violence, which was mostly linked to women's economic dependency.

Unlike in the previous year, NGOs did not lead public awareness campaigns to combat breast ironing during the year, a practice conducted by female family members.

While the law prohibits prostitution, it was tolerated and practiced predominantly in urban areas and places frequented by tourists.

While the law prohibits sexual harassment, very few cases were reported or prosecuted during the year. The government did not conduct any public education campaigns on the subject and there were no statistics available on its occurrence.

Despite constitutional provisions recognizing women's rights, women did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. Some points of civil law were prejudicial to women. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family worked with other government agencies to promote the legal rights of women.

In rural areas of the northern regions, societal pressures continued to reinforce taboos on discussing contraception and all other sex-related issues. However, the government, in cooperation with NGOs, conducted programs designed to educate couples, especially men, to better understand the positive aspects of responsible spacing between childbirths. For several years the Ministry of Public Health had been producing radio and televised information programs on responsible parenthood, including encouraging couples to use contraception to space the timing of their children. Couples were also encouraged to get HIV/AIDS testing prior to conception, and efforts continued to increase HIV/AIDS testing for all pregnant women at health clinics.

The law allows a husband to oppose his wife's right to work in a separate profession if the protest is made in the interest of the household and the family; a husband may also end his wife's commercial activity by notifying the clerk of the commerce tribunal of his opposition based upon the family's interest.

Customary law is far more discriminatory against women, since in many regions a woman traditionally was regarded as the property of her husband. Because of the importance attached to customs and traditions, civil laws protecting women often are not respected.

Children

Citizenship is derived from parents' nationality. It is the parent's, not the government's, responsibility to register births. Parents must obtain a birth declaration from the hospital, or health facility in which the child was born, and complete the application. The mayor's office subsequently issues the birth certificate once the file is completed and approved.

The law provides for a child's right to education. Schooling was mandatory through the age of 14 and free in public primary schools. Since parents had to pay uniform and book fees for primary school, and because tuition and other fees for secondary education remained costly, education was largely unaffordable for many children. The government continued

its efforts under a three-year program to improve access to schools, such as the construction of new classrooms, recruitment of new teachers, and provision of water fountains.

According to 2008 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) statistics released during the year, 77.31 percent of girls between the ages of six and 14 were enrolled in primary school, compared to 88.34 percent of boys in the same age group. According to a 2006 report from the presidency the secondary school enrollment ratio was 38.1 percent for boys and 37.1 percent for girls.

The low school enrollment rate, especially for girls, continued to be attributed to high costs, socio-cultural prejudices, early marriage, sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancy, and domestic chores.

The extent of child abuse was not known, although children's rights organizations targeted the problem. Newspaper reports often cited children as victims of kidnapping, mutilation, and even infanticide. Several press stories reported children being raped between the ages of two and 15-years-old.

In March a 27-year-old young man raped his three-year-old niece, in the Yaounde neighborhood of Obobogo. As the girl was rushed to the hospital, gendarmes, who had been alerted by the family, arrested the young man. He was detained, pending trial at year's end.

On August 9, a 17-year-old girl was raped by three of her brother's friends in the Yaounde neighborhood of Nkolndongo. The three, who escaped the crime scene, were subsequently arrested, and were in custody, awaiting trial.

There were several credible stories of mothers (usually young, unemployed, and unmarried) abandoning their newborns in streets, garbage cans, and pit toilets.

The law does not prohibit FGM, which was practiced in isolated areas of the Far North, East, and Southwest regions.

Internal migration contributed to the spread of FGM to different parts of the country. The majority of FGM procedures were clitorectomies. The severest form of FGM, infibulation, was performed in the Kajifu region of the Southwest Region. FGM usually was practiced on infants and preadolescent girls. Public health centers in areas where FGM was frequently practiced counseled women about the harmful consequences of FGM; however, the government did not prosecute any persons charged with performing FGM. In February, the new Prefet of Kousseri, Logone and Chari Division, Far North Region, upon hearing of 20 young girls who underwent FGM in January, publicly stated that he would chase down the perpetrators.

On February 5, the second International Day against FGM, the minister of women's empowerment and the family organized a ceremony for FGM victims and their families as well as for female and male FGM "doctors" from around the country. The doctors, who had been educated about the harmful effects of FGM, publicly declared their decision to abandon the FGM "business" and called upon their colleagues to also stop and to work to better the lives of young girls and women. The "doctors" received equipment to start new occupational activities, including tailoring and agriculture. The minister insisted on the need for citizens to celebrate the day and encouraged women and men to work together to eradicate FGM. She also reiterated the government's commitment to fulfill the president's promise to address FGM.

While the minimum legal age for a woman to marry is 15, many families facilitated the marriage of young girls by the age of 12. Early marriage was prevalent in the northern regions of Adamaoua, North, and particularly the remote Far North Region, where many girls as young as nine faced severe health risks from pregnancies. There were no statistics on the prevalence of child marriage.

Although exact numbers were unavailable, the country had a significant number of displaced or street children, most of whom resided in urban areas such as Yaounde and Douala.

On April 16, the committee heading the Project to Fight the Phenomenon of Street Children, which was established in January 2008, held its second meeting. The committee reported that between January and April 35 new street children had been identified. The program gathered information on street children, offered psycho-social care, and bolstered the intake capacities of specialized centers.

Approximately 2,000 children lived in the streets of the major urban centers of the country. In April and May 2008, a census conducted in Yaounde and Douala showed that 155 street children lived in Yaounde, and 280 street children lived in Douala. In May 2008 the minister of social affairs launched the operation designed to return 150 children to their families. In December 2008 she revealed that the operation made it possible for 119 out of the 435 children identified in Yaounde and Douala to return home.

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit all forms of trafficking in persons, and there were reports that persons were trafficked to, from, and within the country. The law criminalizes child trafficking and slavery and prohibits prostitution, forced labor, and other crimes related to trafficking in persons.

A 2000 International Labor Organization (ILO) study conducted in Yaounde, Douala, and Bamenda, reported that trafficking accounted for 84 percent of child laborers in those three cities. Local NGOs believed this statistic was still accurate. In most cases, intermediaries presented themselves as businessmen, approaching parents with large families or custodians of orphans and promising to assist the child with education or professional training. The intermediary paid parents an average of 6,000 CFA (\$12) before transporting the child to a city where the intermediary would subject the child to forced labor with little remuneration. In four out of 10 cases the child was a foreigner transported to the country for labor. The report also indicated that the country was a transit site for regional traffickers, who transported children from Nigeria, Benin, Niger, Chad, Togo, the Republic of the Congo, and the CAR for indentured or domestic servitude, farm labor, and sexual exploitation. Citizens also were trafficked to South Africa. Children from Mali were trafficked to the country by religious instructors for forced begging. Both boys and girls were trafficked within the country for forced labor in sweatshops, bars, restaurants, on tea and cocoa plantations, in mines, and for street vending and possibly for forced begging.

Women and children traditionally have faced the greatest risk of trafficking generally for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Most trafficking in children occurred within the country's borders, while most trafficked women were transported out of the country. According to anecdotal evidence from the NCHRF, women frequently were "hired" into hubs of prostitution, often in Europe. The method for trafficking women usually involved a marriage proposition by a foreign businessman. Women were often inducted into servitude upon arrival at a foreign destination. Credible reports indicated that traffickers used trafficking victims to recruit additional victims. Girls were internally trafficked from the Adamaoua, North, Far North, and Northwest regions to Douala and Yaounde to work as domestic servants, street vendors, or prostitutes.

The law provides that any person who engages in crimes associated with trafficking in persons shall be punished by prison terms of six months to 20 years.

Although statistics were unavailable because traffickers could be prosecuted under various sections of the penal code, the government reportedly prosecuted trafficking cases during the year. On March 23, gendarmes from the Bamenda Gendarmerie Legion in the North West Region arrested a trafficker who was caught transporting five children to the Center Region to work on a cocoa farm. The trafficker was detained in the Bamenda prison pending trial. In January 2008 gendarmerie in the North West Region arrested three traffickers transporting seven children between the ages of 12 and 17 to the Center Region to work as forced laborers. The case was pending in the Bamenda court at year's end.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance (MINLESI) is primarily responsible for fighting trafficking; however, the ministry was severely underfunded. The Minors Brigade was also responsible for investigating child trafficking.

The government continued to fight trafficking through the use of an interagency committee and a program to find and return trafficked children. In addition, the government cooperated with the governments of Gabon, Nigeria, Togo, and Benin to fight trafficking through the exchange of information and preparation of common legislation on trafficking. The Interpol office in the country also played a significant role in the government's antitrafficking actions.

The government continued to work with local and international NGOs to provide temporary shelter and assistance to victims of trafficking. On July 22, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) launched a project to fight child trafficking in the North West Region. CRS had previously worked with the North West Region branch of the Justice and Peace Committee of the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon to survey the extent of trafficking in the region. CRS also worked to combat corruption in local schools that led to child prostitution. UNICEF was also actively engaged in combating girls' prostitution throughout the year.

The government continued to build awareness among local government and security officials in the areas where trafficking was an issue. Antitrafficking information, education campaigns, and antitrafficking spots were broadcast on government radio and television. The government monitored immigration and emigration patterns for evidence of trafficking. Frontier police at airports, borders, and ports reported stopping many trafficking cases but did not provide details regarding specific cases.

The State Department's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* can be found at www.state.gov/g/tip.

Persons with Disabilities

The law provides certain rights to persons with disabilities, including access to public buildings, medical treatment, and education, and the government was obliged to provide part of the educational expense of persons with disabilities, to employ them where possible, and to provide them with public assistance when necessary. Access to public secondary education is free for persons with disabilities and children born of parents with disabilities. In practice, there were few facilities for persons with disabilities and little public assistance; lack of facilities and care for persons with mental disabilities was particularly acute. Society largely tended to treat those with disabilities as outcasts, and many felt that providing assistance was the responsibility of churches or foreign NGOs.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The population consists of more than 200 ethnic groups, among which there were frequent and credible allegations of discrimination. Ethnic groups commonly gave preferential treatment to fellow ethnic group members in business and social practices. Members of the president's Beti/Bulu ethnic group from southern parts of the country held key positions and were disproportionately represented in the government, state-owned businesses, the security forces, and the ruling CPDM party. The minister of defense, the delegate general for national security, and the minister of posts and telecommunications were all from the South Region.

In July 2008, in Akonolinga, Center Region, several persons were injured and killed in ethnically motivated violence. The violence occurred when a soccer team from the city of Dschang, Menoua Division, West Region, a region predominated by ethnic Bamilekes, defeated the local soccer team. Members of the Yebekolo tribe sought out and beat ethnic Bamilekes in Akonolinga. The government investigated the incident and arrested 40 persons. On June 16, the Akonolinga High Court held the first hearing on the case. However, the judge continued to postpone the trial as the lawyers failed to show up and the prosecutor failed to bring exhibits to the court. The 40 persons were still detained at year's end.

In 2008 there were reports that Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo, a wealthy businessman with ties to the government, deceived M'Bororo women into sexual situations, forcibly displaced the M'Bororo and seized their land and cattle, and used his money and influence with the government to order the beating and false imprisonment of members of the M'Bororo.

The commission established in 2007 to demarcate the borders between the Oku and the Mbessa tribes in both Bui and Boyo divisions in the North West Region began work in 2008 and continued its action during the year.

In 2007 the Bui Oku burned dozens of Mbessa houses, displacing more than 500 persons. The Oku claimed that the Mbessa were farming on their land. They also accused them of having caught and raped Oku women, a charge disputed by local authorities. Local territorial command officials reported that the investigation, although ongoing at year's end, was complicated by the allegations that traditional rulers threatened potential witnesses. The government continued efforts to settle the dispute.

Northern areas of the country continued to suffer from ethnic tensions between the Fulani (or Peuhl) and the Kirdi. The Kirdi remained socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged relative to the Fulani in the three northern regions.

Traditional Fulani rulers, called Lamibe, continued to wield great power over their subjects, often including Kirdi, sometimes subjecting them to tithing and forced labor. Isolated cases of slavery were reported, largely Fulani enslavement of Kirdi. For example, many Fulani considered themselves rich and "hired" Kirdi to perform tasks that the Fulani think are menial and beneath them.

Natives of the North West and South West regions tended to support the opposition SDF party and consequently suffered disproportionately from human rights abuses committed by the government and its security forces. The anglophone community was underrepresented in the public sector. Although citizens in certain francophone areas--the East, Far North, North, and Adamaoua Regions--voiced similar complaints about under-representation and government neglect, anglophones said they generally believed that they had not received a fair share of public sector goods and services within their two regions. Some residents of the anglophone region sought greater freedom, equality of opportunity, and better government by regaining regional autonomy rather than through national political reform, and have formed several quasi-political organizations in pursuit of their goals.

Police and gendarmes subjected illegal immigrants from Nigeria and Chad to harassment and imprisonment. During raids, members of the security forces extorted money from those who did not have regular residence permits or who did not have valid receipts for store merchandise. Some members of the country's large community of Nigerian immigrants complained of discrimination and abuse by government officials. Illegal immigrants were subject to harassment on some occasions, although at a lower level than in previous years, mainly due to the DGSN who adopted a zero tolerance policy regarding harassment by his officers.

Indigenous People

An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 Baka, Bakola, and Bagyeli (Pygmies) primarily resided (and were the earliest known inhabitants) in the forested areas of the South and East regions. While no legal discrimination exists, other groups often treated the Baka as inferior and sometimes subjected them to unfair and exploitative labor practices. Baka reportedly continued to complain that the forests they inhabit were being logged without fair compensation. Some observers believed that sustained logging was destroying the Baka's unique, forest-oriented belief system, forcing them to adapt their traditional social and economic systems to a more rigid modern society similar to their Bantu neighbors.

The government has increased efforts, such as education about birth certificates, national identity cards, and construction of school and health care facilities, to facilitate an easier transition to modern day society for pygmies who are interested in adapting while also preserving important aspects of their culture.

Local Baka along the path of the Chad-Cameroon pipeline continued to complain that they were not compensated fairly for their land or had been cheated by persons posing as Baka representatives. In 2006 the committee in charge of the follow-up on the pipeline organized an evaluation seminar to determine compensation for the Bakola and Bagyeli. The committee agreed that despite improved access to education and healthcare, much remained to be done to improve living conditions for the pygmies. No further developments were reported during the year. In October 2008 the Fondation Camerounaise d' Actions Rationalisees et de Formation sur l' Environnement conducted a study in 28 villages in the Center and South regions that confirmed the pygmies' complaints (Kribi Region) that they had not yet been fully compensated. The final conclusions of the study were not released by year's end.

An estimated 95 percent of Baka did not have national identity cards; most Baka could not afford to provide the necessary documentation to obtain national identity cards, which were required to vote in national elections. In 2005 the Ministry of Social Affairs launched the Project to Support the Economic and Social Development of Bakas in South Region. The mission of the project was to allow the issuance of birth certificates and national identity cards to 2,300 Bakas, as well as to help register hundreds of students in school. On August 14, the regional coordinator of the National Program for Participative Development, the implementing agency, revealed that they were able to assist with 2,000 birth certificates and approximately 1,000 national identity cards. The program was ongoing at year's end.

Societal Abuses, Discrimination, and Acts of Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Homosexual activity is illegal and punishable by a prison sentence of six months to five years and a fine ranging from 20,000 to 200,000 CFA (\$40 to \$400). Homosexual persons generally kept a low profile because of the pervasive societal stigma, discrimination, and harassment as well as the possibility of imprisonment.

Authorities prosecuted at least two persons under this law during the year. Homosexual persons suffered from harassment and extortion by law enforcement officials. False allegations of homosexuality were used to harass enemies or to extort money.

On September 14, the instructing magistrate of the Wouri High Court in Douala ordered the release of Yves Noe Ewane for lack of evidence, after he had spent four months in jail. The police arrested Ewane on May 4, and on May 19, the prosecutor placed him under pretrial detention on homosexuality charges.

On November 10, the Douala police arrested Alain Nje Penda on homosexuality charges. He remained in jail awaiting trial at year's end.

In 2007 the Bonanjo High Court refused to release six Douala men held in New Bell Prison on charges of homosexuality. In January 2008 the judge held the first hearing on the case but adjourned it pending further discovery. There were no further developments on the case by year's end.

Several lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations operated in the country. However, there were no reports of discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, access to health care, or education.

Other Societal Discrimination

Persons infected with HIV/AIDS were often discriminated against and isolated from their families and society due to the societal stigma and lack of education about the disease.

Section 7 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join trade unions; however, the government imposed numerous restrictions. 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 closely related, sectors.

The law requires that unions register with the government, permitting groups of no less than 20 workers to organize a union by submitting a constitution, bylaws, and non-conviction certifications for each founding member. The law provides for prison sentences and fines for workers who form a union and carry out union activities without registration.

Government officials stated that the government provided union certification within one month of application; however, independent unions, especially in the public sector, found it difficult to register. For example, the Syndicat National des Enseignants du Supérieur was not officially registered but operated without government interference.

Registered unions were subject to government interference. The government chose the unions with which it would bargain; some independent unions accused the government of creating small nonrepresentative unions amenable to government positions and with which it could negotiate more easily. Some sections of labor law had no force or effect because the presidency had not issued implementing decrees.

The labor code explicitly recognizes workers' right to strike, but only after mandatory arbitration, and workers exercised this right during the year. During the year strikes occurred at some universities, hospitals, the national water company, the Cameroon Bar Association, the Civil Engineering Equipment company, the national railroad company, and among motorcycle taxi drivers. Arbitration decisions are legally binding, but often unenforceable when the parties refuse to cooperate. It was not uncommon for such decisions to be overturned or simply ignored by the government or employers. The provision of the law allowing persons to strike does not apply to civil servants, employees of the penitentiary system, or workers responsible for national security. Instead of strikes, civil servants were required to negotiate grievances directly with the minister of the appropriate department in addition to the minister of labor.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

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.

On January 28, the minister of labor and social insurance presided over the signing of a collective bargaining agreement between the graphic arts sectors. In May the minister of labor and social insurance presided over the signing of a collective bargaining convention for the agricultural sector.

When labor disputes arose, the government chose the labor union with which it would negotiate, selectively excluding some labor representatives. Once agreements were negotiated, there was no mechanism to enforce implementation; some agreements between the government and labor unions were ignored by the government.

For example, in December transportation unions expressed their disappointment at the government because it did not fulfill all the promises (lower gas prices, terminate police and gendarme harassment of transporters on the roads) that it made following the February 2008 strikes. Unions' threats to launch a nationwide strike encouraged the government to negotiate again, with new commitments.

The constitution and law prohibit antiunion discrimination, and employers guilty of such discrimination were subject to fines of up to approximately one million CFA (\$2,000). However, employers found guilty were not required to compensate

workers for discrimination or to reinstate fired workers. The MINLESI did not report any complaints of antiunion discrimination during the year, although there were credible press reports of harassment of union leaders.

In January Madeleine Nkoulou, a nurse under contract and a leader of the National Union of Medical and Health Services Employees, was dismissed from her job at the Regional Hospital of Ebolowa, South Region, because she was active in organizing a strike. She filed a complaint with the MINLESI, and had not received a response by year's end.

The law provides for industrial free zones except for the following provisions: the right to determine salaries according to productivity, the free negotiation of work contracts, and the automatic issuance of work permits for expatriate workers.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The constitution and law prohibit forced or compulsory labor, including by children; however, there were reports that such practices occurred. Prison authorities arranged for prison inmates to be contracted out to private employers or used as communal labor for municipal public works. Money generated from these activities was usually pocketed by prison administrators and not given to detainees.

Hereditary servitude occurred in the Northern regions. Slavery is illegal in the country, and the law provides punishment of 10 to 20 years' imprisonment for persons accused of slavery or trafficking in persons for the purposes of forced labor. However, there were credible reports of hereditary servitude by former slaves in some chiefdoms in the North Region. For example, there were reports that the Lamido (the traditional Muslim chief) of Rey Bouba in the North Region had hereditary servants inside his compound. Although the Lamido was replaced by his son in 2004, the hereditary servants remained, reportedly by choice for cultural reasons.

In the South and East regions, some Baka, including children, continued to be subjected to unfair and exploitative labor practices by landowners, including forced work on the landowners' farms during harvest seasons without payment.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law generally protects children from exploitation in the workplace and specifies penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment for infringement; however, child labor remained a problem. The government specifically prohibits forced and compulsory labor by children, but there were reports that it occurred in practice.

The law sets a minimum age of 14 for child employment, bans night work, and enumerates tasks that children under the age of 18 cannot legally perform. These include moving heavy objects, dangerous and unhealthy tasks, working in confined areas, and prostitution. The law also states that a child's work day cannot exceed eight hours. Employers were required to train children between the ages of 14 and 18, and work contracts must contain a training provision for minors. The prohibition against night work was not effectively enforced.

Child labor existed chiefly in urban areas. In the informal sector, children worked as street vendors, car washers, and engaged in agricultural work and domestic service such as working on tea, banana, and palm oil plantations. Some children also worked in mines and quarries. Many urban street vendors were less than 14 years of age. Children worked as household help, and some children were involved in prostitution. In the north there were credible reports that children from needy homes were placed with other families to do household work for pay.

There were reports that some parents gave their children to "marabouts" (traditional religious figures) in Maroua in the Extreme North, to learn the Koran and to prepare them to become "marabouts" themselves. However, there were reports that some of these children were kept in leg chains and subjected to forced labor.

Parents viewed child labor as both a tradition and a rite of passage. Relatives often employed rural youth, especially girls, as domestic helpers, and these jobs seldom allowed time for the children to attend school. In rural areas, many children began work at an early age on family farms. According to some NGOs, the cocoa industry also employed child laborers. These children originated, for the most part, from the three northern and the North West regions.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and MINLESI were responsible for enforcing existing child labor laws through site inspections of registered businesses; although sporadic inspections occurred during the year, the government did not allocate sufficient resources to support an effective inspection program. Moreover, the legal prohibitions do not include family chores, which in many instances were beyond a child's capacity. The government employed 58 general labor inspectors to investigate child labor cases.

The ILO continued to work with specific contact persons in various ministries and agencies involved in antitrafficking activities; it also conducted nationwide investigations and cooperated with local organizations.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

In June 2008 the government increased the minimum wage in all sectors to 28,246 CFA (\$56) per month. However, the minimum wage did not provide for a decent standard of living for an average worker and family. MINLESI was responsible for enforcing the minimum wage nationally.

The law establishes a standard workweek of 40 hours in public and private nonagricultural firms and 48 hours in agricultural and related activities. There are exceptions for guards and firemen (56 hours a week), service sector staff (45 hours a week), and household and restaurant staff (54 hours a week). The law mandates at least 24 consecutive hours of weekly rest. Premium pay for overtime ranges from 120 to 150 percent of the hourly pay depending on amount and whether it is for weekend or late-night overtime. There is a prohibition on excessive compulsory service. MINLESI inspectors were responsible for monitoring these standards; however, they lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program.

The government sets health and safety standards. MINLESI inspectors and occupational health physicians were responsible for monitoring these standards; however, they lacked the resources for a comprehensive inspection program. On April 28, during a commemoration of the 13th African Day for the Prevention of Professional Risks and the 6th World Day for Security and Health at Work, the minister of labor and social security expressed concern that work-related accidents were on the rise. On September 22, the National Commission on Health and Safety in the Workplace expanded the list of occupational diseases from 44 to 99. The law does not provide workers with the right to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardizing their continued employment.