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U.S. Department of State

Cameroon Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.

CAMEROON

Cameroon is a multiparty republic which continues to be dominated by President Paul Biya and a circle of advisers drawn largely from his own ethnic group and from his party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). The CPDM's power was last challenged in 1992 in relatively free National Assembly elections and highly flawed presidential elections in which Biya was elected to a 5-year term. The CPDM successfully dominates the National Assembly through its controlling share of a ruling coalition. In December 1995, the National Assembly passed amendments to the 1972 Constitution which were promulgated in January by President Biya. The amendments for the first time provide for presidential term limits and certain new legislative institutions, including an independent judiciary, which remains subject to political influence, a partially elected senate, and elected regional councils. However, the amendments have not yet been implemented and have done little to strengthen the independence of the judiciary or to moderate the President's power to dominate legislation, or rule by decree. In January the country held its first nationwide municipal elections.

Internal security responsibilities are shared by the national police, the National Intelligence Service (DGRE), the gendarmerie, the Ministry of Territorial Administration, military intelligence, the army, and to a lesser extent, the Presidential Security Service. The police and the gendarmerie have dominant roles in enforcing internal security laws. The security forces, including the military forces, remain under the effective control of the President, the civilian Minister of Defense, and the civilian head of police. The police and gendarmes continued to commit numerous human rights abuses.

Following nearly a decade of economic decline and widening financial imbalance, the 1994 cfa franc

devaluation substantially restored external competitiveness. Economic growth recovered, averaging more than 3 percent annually over the last 3 years. The majority of the population is rural. The Government has begun implementing a program of structural reforms. Agriculture accounts for one-third of gross domestic product, while industry and the services sector account, for 26 and 33 percent, respectively. The petroleum sector has declined sharply as a share of public revenues. Principal exports include timber, coffee, cocoa, cotton, bananas, and rubber.

The Government's human rights record continued to be poor, although there was some improvement in certain areas. The Government continued to commit numerous serious human rights abuses. Citizens' ability to change their government remained limited. Security forces committed several extrajudicial killings and often beat and otherwise abused detainees and prisoners, generally with impunity. Conditions remained life threatening in almost all prisons. Security forces continued to arrest and detain citizens arbitrarily, often holding them for prolonged periods and, at times, incommunicado. The judiciary is corrupt, inefficient, and subject to political influence. Security forces conducted illegal searches, harassed citizens, infringed on their privacy, and monitored some opposition activists. A January law revoked formal press censorship and moved supervision of the press from the administrative authorities to the courts. However, the Government continued to impose some limits on press freedom. The authorities retain the power to seize publications deemed to put public order in jeopardy and used this power on at least two occasions. Although independent newspapers enjoyed considerable latitude to publish their views, journalists were subject to harassment, trial, and conviction under criminal libel laws. Authorities prosecuted and obtained convictions against several editors and journalists under these laws, and some received stiff fines and prison sentences. The Government sometimes restricted freedom of assembly and association. At times, security forces were used to inhibit political parties from holding public meetings. The Government restricts freedom of movement. Discrimination and violence against women remain serious problems.

Discrimination against ethnic minorities and Pygmies persists. The Government infringes on workers' rights, and slavery persists in an isolated northern region. Mob violence and intertribal disputes resulted in dozens of deaths. Nationwide multiparty municipal elections were relatively free and fair, although in some areas the Government restricted opposition candidate lists. After the election, the Government used legal but undemocratic means to ensure its control of municipal councils won by the opposition, provoking widespread protest and an attempt to conduct general strikes.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no confirmed reports of political killings. However, the security forces continued to use excessive, lethal force and committed several extrajudicial killings.

In February an unarmed, unresisting taxi driver was shot and killed by a policeman near Bafut, Northwest province, in view of witnesses. The reasons for the shooting are unclear. The authorities took no action against the policeman, but an investigation into the case is underway.

On March 1, a pregnant woman was shot and killed by a soldier in the Limbe, Southwest province, market during a political demonstration by the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party. In the incident, the killer himself was immediately shot and killed by a fellow soldier. Security forces killed three other persons in an ensuing riot.

On March 15, Andre Tchieutcho, a suspected thief, was shot and killed inside the Mboppi gendarme headquarters.

On April 14, police outside Yaounde fired on a stolen vehicle, killing, in addition to the suspected perpetrators, two apparently innocent young men who had been given a ride by the alleged thieves.

On May 24, a Douala taxi driver, Joseph Desire Tuete Kuipo, was shot and killed by a policeman when he allegedly refused to pay a bribe at one of the ubiquitous and illegal police roadblocks. An outraged crowd attacked the policeman, seriously injuring him. At year's end, an investigation into the killing was underway. The police officer was suspended pending the results of the investigation.

In January Haman Daouda, a member of the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP) party and a member of the National Assembly and members of his staff were assaulted while campaigning in the municipal elections in the territory of the Lamido (chief) of Mayo Rey, North province. The Lamido, an important supporter of the ruling CPDM party, reportedly directed his palace guard to injure or kill the parliamentarians. Haman Daouda died in February as a result of his injuries. UNDP demands for a government investigation were unsuccessful. A continuing series of intertribal land disputes in Northwest province resulted in several deaths and injuries.

In March residents of the villages of Babanki and Bambili, Northwest province, battled over the ownership of a section of land adjoining both villages. Seven persons died. This clash was but one of several that occurred during the year in Northwest province, resulting in an unknown number of deaths and injuries. In response, the Government sought to resolve the dispute with the assistance of traditional rulers. Several persons were arrested for their participation in the violence.

Mob violence directed at persons suspected of criminal activity or witchcraft resulted in a number of deaths and injuries.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances. However, in June a prominent Bafoussam, West province, barrister and SDF activist, Joseph Lavoisier Tsapy, claimed that he had been seized by armed plainclothes policemen, blindfolded, and held for 4 days in an unknown location before being released unharmed. The period of his disappearance coincided with a planned SDF general strike in Bafoussam, for which Tsapy, President of the Town Council, was a leading organizer. While government authorities denied any involvement in Tsapy's disappearance, and the charges were never proved, many independent observers considered Tsapy's claim credible.

In September Nicolas Tejoumessie, editor of the newspaper Challenge Nouveau, was arbitrarily detained and beaten by four persons who claimed to be members of the secret police (see Section 1.c.).

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

The Penal Code proscribes torture, renders inadmissible in court evidence obtained thereby, and prohibits public servants from using undue force against any person. In spite of this, there were credible reports that security forces inflicted beatings and other cruel and degrading treatment on prisoners and detainees. The beatings occurred not in prison facilities but in temporary detention areas in a police or gendarme facility.

Security forces subject prisoners and detainees to degrading mistreatment, including stripping,

confinement in severely overcrowded cells, and denial of access to toilets or other sanitation facilities. Police and gendarmes often beat detainees to extract confessions and the names and whereabouts of alleged criminals. Sanctions against those responsible are rare.

Prison conditions are life threatening, especially outside major urban areas. Serious deficiencies in food, health care, and sanitation owing to the lack of resources occur in almost all prisons, including those run by traditional rulers in the north. Families are permitted to provide food and medicine. Beatings are common. Prisoners are reported to be chained at times in their cells and often denied adequate medical care. Juveniles and nonviolent prisoners are often incarcerated with violent adults. There are credible reports of sexual abuse of juvenile prisoners by adult inmates. Corruption among prison personnel is widespread. Some high profile prisoners are able to avoid some of the abuse that is routinely meted out to many common criminals. Some are held in elite wings of certain prisons where they enjoy relatively lenient treatment.

Following a March SDF demonstration in Limbe, security forces arrested 32 SDF members and held them under administrative detention in Buea Prison for more than 1 month pending investigation. There were credible reports that the prisoners suffered from excessive crowding and were denied adequate nutrition and medical care.

In the north, the Government permits traditional Lamibe (chiefs) to operate private prisons outside the government penitentiary system. Private prisons in the chiefdoms of Rey Bouba, Bibemi, and Tcheboa have the worst reputations. Members of the UNDP party alleged that their members have been detained in them and that some have died from mistreatment.

Because of the Government's refusal to guarantee the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to all detention centers, official as well as unofficial, the ICRC has declined to visit any prisons since 1992, although both the Cameroonian Red Cross and the National Human Rights Commission make frequent visits.

In a May and June student strike at the University of Yaounde, a number of students were beaten both by police and by local thugs on university property, and as many as 30 were taken to prison and beaten there. Credible reports indicate that the troublemakers were encouraged by university authorities to help suppress the strike. Some of the students were held in prison for up to 40 days before being released pending court procedin