

2019 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cameroon

CAMEROON: Tier 2

The Government of the Republic of Cameroon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period; therefore Cameroon remained on Tier 2. These efforts included convicting more traffickers, identifying and referring trafficking victims to services, and providing repatriation assistance for more foreign trafficking victims. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not fully disseminate its standard operating procedures on victim identification and referral to law enforcement or first responders and did not pass draft anti-trafficking legislation from 2012 that conforms to international law.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS

Train law enforcement and NGO personnel on the National Referral System and Standard Operating Procedures on victim identification and referral to increase first responders' ability to proactively identify internal trafficking cases as well as cross-border trafficking as distinct from smuggling. • Expand training for law enforcement, judicial officials, and social workers on the anti-trafficking section of the penal code as well as victim-centered approaches to increase effective trafficking investigations and prosecutions while respecting the rule of law and human rights, and administer fair and just sentences to those convicted. • Increase formal collaboration with NGOs on proactively identifying and protecting victims. • Regularly convene the anti-trafficking inter-ministerial committee (IMC) and include NGOs and international organizations working to address trafficking in persons in Cameroon. • Amend anti-trafficking laws to remove the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion for child sex trafficking offenses and to make a clear distinction between trafficking and smuggling. • Publicize information to citizens on their rights as foreign workers and sources of assistance while abroad. • Investigate labor recruiters and agencies suspected of fraudulent recruitment—including unlicensed recruiters and intermediaries—and prosecute those complicit in trafficking.

PROSECUTION

The government increased its anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law criminalized some forms of sex trafficking and all forms of labor trafficking. Inconsistent with international law, Cameroon's law required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offense, and therefore did not criminalize all forms of child sex trafficking. The law prescribed penalties of 10 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 to 1 million Central African francs (CFA) (\$83- \$1,660), which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. If the trafficking offense involved a victim who was 15 years old or younger, the penalties increased to 15 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 to 10 million CFA (\$170 to \$16,560). The law prescribed separate penalties for debt bondage, which ranged from five to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 to 500,000 CFA (\$17-\$830) and were also sufficiently stringent. The law was published in French and

English, the two official languages of the government. The English version conflated trafficking in persons and smuggling offenses by referring to trafficking in persons offenses, as defined under international law, as “slavery in persons,” while referring to smuggling-related offenses as “trafficking in persons.” Increasing the potential for conflating smuggling and trafficking in persons, Article 342 of Cameroon’s 2016 Penal Code prohibited both “trafficking in persons” and “slavery in persons.” Legislation drafted in 2012 to address victim and witness protection and correct inconsistencies with international law remained pending for the seventh consecutive year.

The government did not provide comprehensive law enforcement statistics, but its IMC reported the Department of Judicial Police investigated eight suspected trafficking cases and authorities prosecuted 126 potential cases under Article 342 in 2018. Because Article 342 prohibited both “trafficking in persons” and “slavery in persons,” the suspects may have included smugglers. In the previous reporting period, the government reported investigating 89 potential sex and labor trafficking cases, and prosecuting 129 suspected traffickers. The IMC reported the government convicted 13 traffickers in eight separate court decisions during the reporting period, and sentenced traffickers to verdicts ranging from 2.5 years with fines to 20 years with fines; the government convicted five traffickers in the previous reporting period. The judiciary reportedly investigated one government official for alleged involvement in trafficking offenses that occurred in 2018, compared to one such investigation the previous year.

Ongoing insecurity in the Far North Region as well as armed conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions between the government and Anglophone separatists hindered the government’s law enforcement efforts due to the closure of courts in Bamenda and Buea and lack of official access in some areas. Some regional courts and NGOs encouraged victims to settle trafficking cases outside of court in part because of insufficient cooperation between the government and NGOs, and weak judicial administration. The government coordinated with international organizations to obtain anti-trafficking training for more than 37 law enforcement officials but did not directly train prosecutors, judges, or first responders. Because many law enforcement and judicial officials lack knowledge of the crime, some trafficking offenses may have been tried as child abuse or kidnapping, which carried lesser penalties.

PROTECTION

The government maintained efforts to identify and protect victims. The government reported identifying and referring 62 victims to government services during the reporting period, compared with identifying 136 potential victims during the previous reporting period when data may have included victims of trafficking-related crimes. In 2018, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) reported identifying 877 street children vulnerable to trafficking, and referred 307 of those children either to government-run shelters or reunited them with their families. MINAS continued its public awareness campaign that resulted in the identification of at least 21 children—aged six to 13—who may have been involved in exploitative child labor. MINAS reported identifying more than 1,100 vulnerable street children throughout Cameroon in 2017; reunited 142 of those children with their families; placed 23 in

government-sponsored care facilities; provided 40 with vocational training; and assisted 19 in resuming formal education. Media reported the government deported approximately 9,000 Nigerian refugees fleeing the terrorist group Boko Haram in February 2019 without screening for trafficking indicators.

NGOs reported thousands of Cameroonian workers remained in Middle Eastern countries, and many of these workers were at risk of traffickers subjecting them to domestic servitude or sex trafficking. During the reporting period, the government repatriated at least 14 trafficking victims from Kuwait and issued them special travel documents (*laissez passer*) after traffickers seized their passports. The government repatriated three trafficking victims during the previous reporting period.

While the government developed a National Referral System and Standard Operating Procedures (NRS/SOP) in 2013 to guide officials in proactive identification and referral of trafficking victims, it did not implement the NRS/SOP nor did it report training officials on the measures. MINAS had the authority to admit child trafficking victims to government institutions for vulnerable children, which offered shelter, food, medical and psychological care, education, vocational training, and family tracing. However, the government did not report referring victims of trafficking to these facilities during the reporting period. Private centers funded by NGOs and regulated by MINAS provided care for an unknown number of child victims. The government did not offer trafficking-specific services for adult or child victims, but did provide services to minors at risk of trafficking along with other vulnerable children.

The government did not have a formal policy to encourage victims to participate in investigations or prosecutions of their traffickers and did not report providing counseling, legal support, or any other assistance to victims who testified during court proceedings. The government did not report providing protection for victims cooperating with trafficking investigations in spite of experts claiming trafficking networks repeatedly threatened victims during their trials. While there were no reports that the government penalized any trafficking victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, some victims may have remained unidentified in the law enforcement system due to the limited use of the NRS/SOP and understanding of the crime among officials. The government could grant temporary residency status to foreign victims who, if deported, may face hardship or retribution; however, it did not report providing this accommodation during the reporting period.

PREVENTION

The government decreased prevention efforts. A lack of coordination and funding impeded implementation of the 2017-2019 anti-trafficking national action plan. The Ministry of Basic Education opened an unknown number of new schools and hired over 4,000 teachers to increase academic opportunities for approximately 200,000 children at risk of exploitation. The IMC met once in 2018, compared with five times in 2017.

MINAS continued its public awareness campaign directed towards the general public and vulnerable children designed to inform Cameroonians on trafficking indicators; in 2018, the government held 5,014 community awareness sessions on trafficking and reached approximately 69,000 Cameroonians. To reduce the number of Cameroonian women exploited in destination countries in the Middle East, border police, customs officials, and gendarmerie screened individuals for trafficking indicators at airports, requiring proof of valid contracts in some cases. The government reported the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP), in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, monitored formal labor recruiters and revoked the licenses of an unknown number of fraudulent labor recruitment firms. MINEFOP officials reported annually publishing a list of licensed recruitment agencies, although the scope of dissemination was unknown. MINEFOP reported it does not have a system to prevent traffickers from exploiting workers once they have been placed in overseas employment. Increasing their vulnerability to trafficking, Cameroonians frequently used unauthorized recruiters to seek employment abroad. The government continued its negotiations with the governments of Lebanon and Qatar to finalize anti-trafficking MOUs, initiated in 2016 by the Ministry of External Relations (MINREX). In November 2018, MINREX established a consulate in Dubai that will allow officials to more effectively respond to suspected trafficking cases.

Between 2015 and 2017, a Cameroonian diplomat posted in the United States is reported to have engaged in visa fraud related to a minor female domestic worker. Because of diplomatic immunity, the United States could not commence prosecution, nor did the government report taking any action during the reporting period to hold the diplomat accountable.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Cameroon, and traffickers exploit victims from Cameroon abroad. Child traffickers often use the promise of education or a better life in urban areas to convince rural parents to give their children over to an intermediary, who then exploits the children in sex trafficking or forced labor. Criminals subject homeless children and orphans to sex trafficking and forced labor in urban areas. Some labor recruiters lure teenagers and adolescents from economically disadvantaged families to cities with the prospect of employment and then subject victims to labor or sex trafficking. Traffickers exploit Cameroonian children in domestic service, restaurants, begging or vending on streets and highways, artisanal gold mining, gravel quarries, fishing, animal breeding, and agriculture (on onion, cotton, tea, and cocoa plantations), as well as in urban transportation assisting bus drivers and in construction as errand boys, laborers, or night watchmen. Children from neighboring countries are exploited in spare parts shops or by herders in northern Cameroon. Traffickers exploit some children transiting the country en route to Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Anecdotal evidence suggests some Chinese business owners fraudulently recruit young girls to work as beauticians and subsequently exploit them in sex trafficking.

An international organization reported in December 2018 Cameroon accommodated over 437,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) resulting from the Anglophone crisis. In addition to the IDPs,

Cameroon has more than 1.1 million individuals of concern—including refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) and Nigeria—as of December 2018. Both the IDPs and the individuals of concern are vulnerable to trafficking due to their economic instability and lack of access to formal justice. Boko Haram’s activities on the border with Nigeria and instability in neighboring CAR have contributed to the displacement of many of these refugees. There continued to be reports of hereditary slavery in northern chiefdoms. Traffickers force CAR refugee children to engage in artisanal gold mining and sex trafficking in some areas of the East and Adamawa regions. An NGO alleged that in 2016 some officially sanctioned community watch groups (vigilance committees) may have used and recruited children as young as 12 years old. Boko Haram is a consistent terrorist threat, and continues to forcibly recruit Cameroonian children as porters, cooks, and scouts. The terrorist organization also uses women and girls as forced suicide bombers and sex slaves and boys as child soldiers. International organizations reported Anglophone separatists abducted children, potentially for use as child soldiers.

Cameroonians from disadvantaged social strata, in particular from rural areas, are exploited in forced labor and sex trafficking in the Middle East (especially Kuwait and Lebanon), as well as in Europe (including Switzerland and Cyprus), the United States, and multiple African countries (including Nigeria). Most exploited Cameroonians abroad are between the ages of 20 and 38, and come from the Northwest, Southwest, Littoral, Center, South, and West Regions. Fraudulent labor brokers recruited some Cameroonian women for domestic work in the Middle East where traffickers then subjected the women to sex trafficking or domestic servitude upon arrival at their destination. Some economic migrants in search of opportunity became victims of trafficking in Libya, or while in transit through Niger.

Trafficking networks generally consist of local community members, including religious leaders and former trafficking victims who have transitioned to perpetrators. These networks advertise jobs through the internet as well as other media, and recruit and sell other Cameroonians directly to families in need of domestic servants. Advocates working on trafficking issues report the government’s awareness-raising activities targeting fraudulent recruitment have raised awareness amongst vulnerable populations, but have caused intermediaries to operate with greater discretion, often directing victims to travel to the Middle East through neighboring countries, including Nigeria. International organizations, NGOs, and migrants report that Cameroonian trafficking networks in Morocco force women into prostitution.