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## 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

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### CAMEROON

Cameroon is a republic dominated by a strong presidency. Since independence, a single party, now called the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), has remained in power and limited political choice. In October 1997, CPDM leader Paul Biya won reelection as President in an election boycotted by the three main opposition parties, marred by a wide range of procedural flaws, and generally considered by observers not to be free and fair. Although the Government legalized opposition parties in 1990 after widespread protests, most subsequent elections, including the May 1997 legislative elections, which were dominated by the CPDM, were flawed by numerous irregularities. International and local observers generally consider the election process, which is controlled by the Government's Ministry of Territorial Administration, as not free and fair. No President has ever left office in consequence of an election. The President retains the power to control legislation or to rule by decree. In the National Assembly, government bills take precedence over other bills, and no bills other than government bills have been enacted since 1991, although legislation proposed by the Government sometimes has not been enacted by the Assembly. The President repeatedly has used his control of the legislature to change the Constitution. The 1996 Constitution lengthened the President's term of office to 7 years, while continuing to allow Biya to run for a fourth consecutive term in 1997 and making him eligible to run for one more 7-year term in 2004. The Government has taken no formal action to implement other 1996 constitutional changes that provide for new legislative institutions, including a partially elected senate and elected regional councils, and a more independent judiciary, even though the President had announced in 1997 that most of these reforms would be implemented in 1998. Although the country's first local government elections were held in 1996, President Biya limited their scope by expanding the number of municipal governments headed by presidentially appointed "delegates" rather than permitting the election of mayors, especially in pro-opposition regions. The Government remained highly centralized. The judiciary is subject to political influence and suffers from corruption and inefficiency.

Internal security responsibilities are shared by the national police (DGSN), the National

Intelligence Service (DGRE), the gendarmerie, the Ministry of Territorial Administration, military intelligence, the army, and to a lesser extent, the Presidential Guard. 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 security forces continued to commit numerous serious human rights abuses.

The country's population of about 15 million had a recorded mean per capita Gross National Product (GNP) of about \$590. Following nearly a decade of economic decline, economic growth resumed in 1994 and subsequently has continued, due chiefly to large public sector salary cuts, a 50 percent currency devaluation, stabilization of terms of trade, and increased external preferential financing and debt relief. In recent years, recorded mean per capita GNP growth has averaged about 2 percent a year in real terms. However, economic recovery continues to be inhibited by a large inefficient parastatal sector, excessive public sector employment, growing defense and internal security expenditures, and by the Government's inability to collect internal revenues effectively, especially in economically important pro-opposition regions. Widespread corruption in government and business also impedes growth. The civil service and the management of state-owned businesses have been dominated by members of the Beti and Bulu ethnic groups. The majority of the population is rural, and agriculture accounts for 25 percent of GNP. Principal exports include timber, coffee, cocoa, cotton, bananas, and rubber. The Government also continued to receive substantial assistance from international financial institutions.

The Government's human rights record continued to be generally poor, and government officials continued to commit numerous serious abuses. Citizens' ability to change their government remained limited. Security forces committed numerous extrajudicial killings; reportedly were responsible for disappearances, some of which may have been politically motivated; and tortured and often beat and otherwise abused detainees and prisoners, generally with impunity. However, the Government prosecuted some of the most egregious offenders; policemen were convicted and sentenced to prison terms for several extrajudicial killings, although the sentence in at least one case was reduced greatly on appeal. Conditions remained harsh and life threatening in almost all prisons, although the Government granted international humanitarian organizations increased access to prisoners. Security forces continued to arrest and detain arbitrarily various opposition politicians, local human rights monitors, and other citizens, often holding them for prolonged periods, often without charges or chance for trial and, at times, incommunicado. Security forces conducted illegal searches and harassed citizens. The judiciary remained corrupt, inefficient, and subject to political influence. A military tribunal exercised criminal jurisdiction over civilians and denied them fair trials. The Government infringed on privacy and monitored and harassed some opposition activists. The Government continued to impose some limits on press freedom. Although private newspapers enjoyed considerable latitude to publish their views, journalists continued to be subject to serious official harassment. Unlike previous years, there were no reports that the Government seized newspaper editions; however, the Government continued its prosecutions of pro-opposition journalists under criminal libel laws. The Government continued to obtain convictions against several journalists under these laws. A 1996 law revoked formal press censorship and moved supervision of the press from the administrative authorities to the courts, but the Government has not yet implemented a 1990 law designed to end its virtual monopoly of domestic broadcast media. The

Government sometimes restricted freedom of assembly and association. At times the Government used its security forces to inhibit political parties from holding public meetings. Government security forces limited freedom of movement and at times impeded the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGO's). Violence and discrimination against women remained serious problems. Female genital mutilation (FGM) persisted in some areas. Discrimination against indigenous Pygmies continued. Societal discrimination based on religion persisted in some areas. Discrimination against ethnic minorities remained widespread. The Government continued to infringe on workers' rights, and restricted the activities of independent labor organizations. Child labor remained a problem. Sla