



CAMEROON -- PROFILE OF ASYLUM CLAIMS & COUNTRY CONDITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Country conditions profiles are produced by the Department of State's Office of Asylum Affairs for use by the Executive Office for Immigration Review and the Immigration and Naturalization Service in assessing asylum claims.¹ They are written by State Department officers with expertise in the relevant area and are circulated for comment within the Department, including to overseas missions, and to other agencies if appropriate. In addition to this profile, adjudicators may wish to refer to the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices or other publicly available information on country conditions.

OVERVIEW OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Political Situation

Cameroon is a multiparty republic dominated by President Paul Biya and a circle of advisers drawn largely from his own (Bulu) and related ethnic groups, and from his own party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). The CPDM's power was challenged in March 1992 when the government organized Cameroon's first multiparty legislative elections in 25 years. The relatively free National Assembly elections resulted in the CPDM winning fewer than half the seats, and the party was forced to form a coalition with a smaller party to retain a working majority. The highly flawed multiparty presidential election that followed in October 1992 resulted in President Biya being returned to power amid widespread allegations of fraud.

In January 1996, the nation held its first nationwide municipal elections, and the CPDM was seriously embarrassed when opposition parties won almost all urban municipal councils. In May 1997, the ruling CPDM's power was challenged again in national legislative elections, but the elections resulted in the CPDM's continued dominance of the National Assembly (with 116 of the 180 seats) amid findings by international observers of numerous irregularities in the voting -- which continued to suffer from the absence of an independent electoral authority.

In October 1997, President Biya was re-elected president for a 7-year term in elections that were non-violently boycotted by the three major opposition political parties -- which, inter alia, objected to the continued absence of an independent electoral authority. According to the government authority supervising the elections, President Biya won re-election with the support of 92 percent of an 82 percent voter turnout. Some opposition sources, however, claimed the voter turnout was closer to 35 percent. In this regard, it should be noted that opposition to the Biya government is also interrelated with issues of ethnic and linguistic differences in Cameroon, in particular with long-standing feelings of discrimination and under-representation

¹ By regulation, the Department of State may provide information on country conditions to help adjudicators assess the accuracy of asylum applicants' assertions about country conditions and their own experiences; likely treatment were the applicants to return; whether persons similarly situated are known to be persecuted; whether grounds for denial are known to exist; and other information relevant to determining the status of a refugee under the grounds specified in section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act.

in the sharing of political power by the Anglophone minority (which is discussed in more detail below in the sections on asylum claims based on race and social group membership).

Presidential elections have significant importance given that Cameroon's 1972 constitution yields extraordinary power to the presidency. The President has the authority to dissolve the National Assembly and call new elections at any time; and to govern by decree during the ten months of each year when the Assembly is not in session. Given the executive and legislative weight of the president and his party, few significant opposition measures have ever come to a vote. In early 1996, a constitutional amendment limited the President to two 7-year terms. Additional amendments provided for a new, partially elected Senate, elected regional councils and a measure of judicial independence. However, these amendments remain to be acted upon in 1998 and thus far have done little to strengthen the independence of the judiciary or to moderate the President's power to dominate legislation and rule by decree. The power of the central government extends across the country, reaching into provincial and municipal administrative structures and dominating the security forces. The President also directly appoints governors of each province and can appoint delegates who oversee the elected councils of Cameroon's major cities.

Human Rights Situation

Despite progress toward multiparty democracy in the 1990s, the government's human rights record continues to be generally poor and government officials continue to commit numerous abuses. Elections have been marred by fraud. Security forces have committed extrajudicial killings and often beat and otherwise abused detainees and prisoners, generally with impunity. Conditions in most prisons remain life-threatening. Security forces have arrested and detained opposition politicians, local human rights activists and ordinary citizens, often holding them for prolonged periods and, occasionally, incommunicado. Although independent newspapers enjoy considerable latitude to publish their views, some journalists have been occasionally harassed, detained and sometimes charged under libel laws, and publications deemed threatening to public order have been seized. At times, security forces have inhibited political parties from holding public meetings.

CLAIMS AND RELEVANT COUNTRY CONDITIONS

Claims Based on Political Opinion

1. Opposition Political Parties

Most Cameroonian asylum applicants claim fear of retribution by the authorities because of their past or present opposition to the Biya government. However, opposition groups in Cameroon are numerous, active, and growing. More than 140 political parties operate legally, along with a growing number of civic associations. They are generally permitted to hold public assemblies, although the government has occasionally harassed opposition groups by denying them access to meeting facilities or refusing them permits on technicalities such as asserting that the proposed meetings "threatened public order." Over the course of 1997, the authorities

detained a limited number of people identified with political opposition to the Biya government.

Many asylum applicants claim membership in the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the leading opposition party. Led by John Fru Ndi, who lost to President Biya by a narrow margin in the controversial 1992 presidential elections, the SDF is supported by many Anglophones and has a strong following in the west and northwest. Another important opposition party, the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP), enjoys strong support in much of the north, particularly among Muslims. A third well known opposition party is the Cameroonian Democratic Union (CDU). These three parties boycotted the recent presidential election, and have generally maintained active political agendas opposing the Biya government. However, after the 1997 presidential elections, the UNDP agreed to participate in the cabinet of the new Biya government, and the SDF later entered into lengthy discussions with the government about possible cooperation. By late February 1998, however, these discussions between the largest opposition party and the party of the President had not resulted in an agreement on the future direction of democracy in Cameroon, including the proposal by the SDF for an independent electoral authority.

In 1992, Cameroon experienced a period of severe political upheaval. There were repeated confrontations between the opposition and the Biya Government. This period of turmoil is the basis for many current asylum claims. Currently, however, the government does not appear to be targeting for mistreatment those who participated in the 1992 political disturbances, some of whom now play prominent roles in the National Assembly, local municipal councils, other public institutions and the press.

The legislative elections in May 1997 were marred by serious irregularities and accusations of fraud. During the electoral campaign, there was one violent encounter where five people were killed in a confrontation between followers of a traditional chief and followers of a campaigning opposition politician. Voting in the country later took place in relative calm. During the presidential elections in October 1997 there was a heavy presence of police and other security forces in some strongholds of the political opposition, but the voting again took place in relatively calm conditions. Physical intimidation of voters appeared limited to some regions where traditional chiefs allied with the President were heavy-handed in blocking access to voting sites.

Although the press in Cameroon has enjoyed increased liberty to publish after the 1996 repeal of a press censorship law, there are penal code libel laws that the government has periodically invoked to the detriment of government critics. During 1997, the government arrested at least five members of the press and prosecuted four on criminal libel charges. The most publicized press-related case involved the December 24, 1997 detention of Pius Njawe, a well-known human rights activist and publisher who was accused of allowing publication of a journalist's report alleging that President Biya might be in ill health. Mr. Njawe was found guilty of spreading false information, heavily fined and sentenced to a two-year prison term.

2. Student Demonstrations

Many asylum applicants from Cameroon base their claim of fear of persecution upon returning to Cameroon on their anti-government activities (such as participation in anti-Biya demonstrations or authorship of anti-government tracts) while they were studying in the United States. Many cite membership in specific student groups in the United States, such as the Cameroonian Students' Association, as proof of their anti-government views. These applicants assert that they will face retribution from the Cameroonian authorities if they return home. We have no recent information, however, suggesting that student activists opposing the Biya Government abroad have been singled out for mistreatment by the authorities upon returning to Cameroon.

Claims Based on Race

Cameroon has more than 200 ethnic groups. These groups form five larger regional-cultural groups: (a) western highlanders (or grasslanders), including the Bamileke, Bamoun, and many smaller entities in the Northwest (estimated 38% of population); (b) coastal rain forest peoples, including the Douala and other entities of the Southwest (12%); (c) southern rain forest peoples, including the Beti, Bulu and Fang as well as some pygmy groups (18%); (d) predominately Islamic peoples of the northern semi-arid regions and the central highlands (14%); and (e) the "kirdi," non-Islamic or recently Islamic peoples of the northern desert and central highlands (18%).

In addition to ethnic diversity, due to particular historical circumstances Cameroon also has a notable division between groups speaking French as their major European language (who make up a majority of the population) and those who speak English as their major European language. The people inhabiting the Northwest and Southwest are more likely to be English-speakers while elsewhere in Cameroon French predominates as the major European language. The Anglophone minority often charges that the Francophone majority does not share real power and that the government provides fewer economic benefits to English-speaking regions. In fact, the ethnic group (Bulu) of President Paul Biya and related ethnic groups -- inhabiting a relatively small area within the Francophone part of Cameroon -- do appear to hold a disproportionate number of key positions in the civil service and security forces, including the military. Even so, all levels of public administration still include significant numbers from other ethnic groups, including those from the Anglophone part of Cameroon.

Claims Based on Nationality

We have seen no recent asylum claims from Cameroonians based on nationality.

Claims Based on Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and this is generally observed in practice. Religious groups must be approved and registered with the Ministry of Territorial Administration in order to function legally. There are no current reports of the government

refusing registration to any Christian denomination. Many Christian churches of various denominations operate freely throughout the country. Some Christians in rural areas of the north, a predominantly Muslim region, have complained of discrimination by Muslims. Such discrimination appears to arise from cultural bias, and not from government practice. The Catholic Church has occasionally been criticized by the government for being overly friendly to the political opposition through its criticism of government corruption and mismanagement.

Some asylum applicants have cited their status as Jehovah's Witnesses as the basis for their claim. The Jehovah's Witnesses, banned in Cameroon from 1970 to 1990, were granted legal status by a presidential decree signed on February 3, 1993 and may now practice their religion. They are also free to build new places of worship. As of end-December 1997, no Jehovah's Witnesses were known to be imprisoned as a result of their religious beliefs.

Claims Based on Social Group Membership

1. Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is not widely practiced in Cameroon but remains a cultural tradition in certain regions of the north and southwest. Although the exact figures on how many women have undergone FGM are not available, it is believed to be considerably less than five percent of the female population. Neither the government nor religious leaders condone FGM in Cameroon. Although Cameroon's civil laws do not specifically forbid the practice, there are several women's organizations lobbying for such legislation.

At present, the government uses the means at its disposal to disseminate information regarding the immediate health risks of FGM to female children and the long-term side effects that could lead to sterility or difficulties during childbirth. These include television programs and newspaper articles calling for health care providers to speak out and to help educate the traditional rulers concerning FGM. In March 1997, the government launched a public campaign in conjunction with the World Health Organization (WHO) to educate the populace about the risks of practicing FGM, with the goal of eradicating FGM in Cameroon within 15 to 20 years.

2. The Anglophone Minority

The division between Cameroonians along linguistic lines is a remnant of colonialism. After World War I, a League of Nations mandate partitioned the German colony of Kamerun (which consisted of all of present-day Cameroon and part of what is now Nigeria) between Britain and France. In 1960, French Cameroon achieved independence after an armed struggle and established the Republic of Cameroon. A year later, the largely Muslim northern half of British Cameroon voted to join Nigeria while the largely Christian southern half voted to join with the Republic of Cameroon, forming the Federal Republic of Cameroon, with each region initially maintaining substantial autonomy.

In 1972, constitutional changes provided for a strong central government, thereby ending

the status of the Anglophone region (today's Northwest and Southwest provinces) as a federal entity within the Cameroon union. There is considerable Anglophone discontent and opposition to the Biya government. Members of the Anglophone minority charge that the Francophone majority does not share real political power or economic opportunity. A few Anglophone separatist groups exist, including the Southern Cameroon's National Council (SCNC), a generally non-violent umbrella organization for the Anglophone separatist movement, and the more radical Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM), which has called for violent revolution. While Anglophone frustration is real and widespread, most support the country's leading opposition party, the SDF, which is committed to Cameroonian unity within a federal structure.

Other Considerations for Adjudicators

Economic Motivations for Migration

As in many developing countries, a relatively low per capita income in Cameroon has been an incentive for Cameroonians to seek a better economic future elsewhere, such as in France, Canada or the United States. The 50 percent devaluation of the CFA franc in 14 West and Central African countries in January 1994 contributed to a lowering of income, including for government employees. In 1995, however, Cameroon's economy turned around and began growing at 3-5 percent annually, in part because of increased exports resulting from the devaluation. Modest improvement in Cameroon's economy does little, however, to close the income gap between Cameroon and more developed countries, hence maintaining the incentive for Cameroonians, especially younger people, to seek better economic opportunities abroad. In this regard, Anglophone Cameroonians are likely to be particularly attracted to an English-speaking country like the United States.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS IN CAMEROON

- November 4, 1982 President Ahmadou Ahidjo resigned and his constitutional successor, Prime Minister Paul Biya, took office as President. Under President Ahidjo all political parties had been gradually consolidated into the Cameroon National Union, with Ahidjo retaining the party presidency until he resigned that post as well in 1983.
- September 1983 Paul Biya was elected President of the Cameroon National Union, which under his leadership was renamed in 1985 as the Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM), which continues to be the dominant political party in Cameroon.
- January 1984 President Biya ran unopposed for the Presidency in an essentially one-party system, officially receiving 99.98 percent of the votes cast.
- 1992 President Biya was re-elected in multiparty elections viewed by observers as highly flawed, although National Assembly elections in the same year were viewed as relatively free and fair.
- January 1996 Cameroon held its first nationwide, multiparty municipal elections, which were judged by observers to be free and fair. Opposition parties won victories in 104 of 336 elections contested.
- May 1997 Multiparty legislative elections -- marred by numerous voting irregularities -- gave a strong majority in the National Assembly to the ruling party (CPDM) of President Biya.
- October 12, 1997 President Biya won re-election in multiparty elections that were boycotted by the major opposition parties, marred by violations of the electoral code and not supervised by an independent electoral authority. Officially, President Biya won 92 percent of an 82 percent voter turnout, although opposition parties claimed their boycott had effectively reduced voter turnout to closer to 35 percent.
- December 24, 1997 Pius Njawe, a well-known human rights activist and publisher, was detained for publishing an article alleging President Biya might be in ill health. Mr. Njawe was subsequently tried, found guilty of spreading false information, fined and sentenced to a two-year prison term.

