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Cameroon: Blatant disregard for human rights

In a report published today, Amnesty International provides a lengthy and detailed account of the Cameroon government's continuing and increasing contempt and disregard for fundamental human rights.

"Human rights are persistently violated in Cameroon, often when the law is deliberately ignored or contravened by the authorities. There is little accountability for human rights violations and the perpetrators generally act with impunity," Amnesty International said.

Hundreds of critics and opponents of the government -- members and supporters of opposition political parties, journalists, human rights activists and students -- have been harassed, assaulted, arrested and imprisoned.

"Increased political tension in a year of both parliamentary and presidential elections, together with the issue of autonomy for Cameroon's English-speaking minority, threatens to bring about a further deterioration in the human rights situation in Cameroon," Amnesty International said.

As the presidential election, due to take place in October or November, approaches, the Cameroon authorities seem set to continue to suppress political opposition. A former member of the government who resigned in April and announced his intention to stand against President Paul Biya has been imprisoned, together with his presidential campaign manager.

As many as 300 people, mostly members and supporters of the principal opposition political party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), were arrested in North-West and South-West Provinces, both strongholds of the opposition, in late March this year, seven weeks before the parliamentary elections on 17 May.

These arrests followed a series of armed attacks, attributed by the authorities to a group supporting independence for Cameroon's two English-speaking provinces, on military, police and civilian establishments in several towns in North-West Province. Ten people, including three gendarmes, died in the attacks. While Amnesty International acknowledges the government's responsibility to bring to justice those who have committed criminal offences, many people appeared to have been arrested simply because of their support for the SDF, without evidence of involvement in the attacks.

An increasing number of journalists have been imprisoned after being tried and convicted of criminal charges; others have been held without charge. Journalists are repeatedly harassed and assaulted, and newspapers suspended and confiscated.

"The government must ensure that the rights to freedom of expression and of association are respected. Anyone detained only because of their political opinions and activities, who has neither used nor advocated violence, should be immediately released," Amnesty International said.

Torture and ill-treatment of both political detainees and common-law prisoners remain routine. At least five of those arrested in connection with the events in North-West Province in late March have since died as a result of torture and ill-treatment and subsequent lack of medical care. Other people have been killed or seriously injured when security forces have used what appeared to be excessive and lethal force.

Prisoners are held in conditions which deny their basic rights and which pose a threat to both health and life. Severe overcrowding, inadequate food, medical care and sanitary facilities result in a high mortality rate in Cameroon's prisons. More than one hundred people are under sentence of death and in January this year the first execution since 1988 was reported to have taken place.

Amnesty International's 39-page report, *Cameroon: Blatant disregard for human rights*, makes concrete recommendations to the Cameroon government for ending systematic violations of human rights. Amnesty International is also calling on the international community to take action to ensure that Cameroon adheres fully to its human rights commitments.

"Cameroon's human rights record should be seriously scrutinized by the international community, including the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity, the Commonwealth and the European Union," Amnesty International said.

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