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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN CAMEROON

ISSUE

Cameroon is a country where human rights violations are neither systematic nor flagrant, but where isolated miscarriages and abuses do occur. Continued vigilance is necessary.

BACKGROUND

Cameroon is emerging from a lengthy period of single-party government. During this period, President Biya concentrated all the decision-making powers in his own hands and made all bureaucratic and political appointments. Theoretically, the National Assembly had the power to table and to debate proposed legislation, but in reality, proposals contrary to the government's wishes were doomed to failure. The need to reflect the country's ethnic composition was one of the few elements that kept abuses from being more widespread. Faced with a rising tide of protest from an ever-increasing opposition made up of journalists, students, politicians of various stripes and the man in the street, President Biya was obliged to open up the political system in 1990.

The years 1991 and 1992 were difficult ones. Violations of human rights rose with the tide of protest. Legislation concerning the authorization of political parties in 1991, the campaign of ghost towns, ethnic and language disturbances, youth protests, harassment of individuals and the failure of the tripartite meeting all contributed to the creation of a rate of political turbulence that did little to further respect for human rights.

There were instances of fraud during the elections, but this did not dissuade a majority of the population from voting for the parties and presidential candidates of the opposition.

However, since the electoral system allows for a multiplicity of parties and candidates, the former governing party and the former authoritarian President registered narrow victories. The opposition, feeling swindled, expressed its disagreement, triggering a repressive reaction on the part of the government, which decreed a state of emergency in one region, and placed John Fru Ndi, the second place presidential candidate under arrest. The subsequent appointment of a national union government stabilized the situation. However, international funding agencies are waiting for concrete evidence that Cameroon indeed plans to adopt policies and practices more respectful to human rights. Discontinuation of the state of emergency in December 1992 was an important first step in the right direction.

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