

LIVES ON HOLD

THE SITUATION OF PEOPLE SENTENCED TO DEATH IN CAMEROON

**FACT-FINDING
MISSION REPORT**



**EC
PM** TOGETHER
AGAINST
THE DEATH
PENALTY



Le Réseau des Avocats
Camerounais
Contre
La peine de mort



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Droits et Paix



Le Réseau des Avocats
Camerounais
Contre
La peine de mort

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PRESENTATION OF COORDINATING ORGANISATIONS



Together Against the Death Penalty (ECPM) has been campaigning since 2000 for the universal abolition of capital punishment through advocacy work, awareness-raising initiatives and by uniting and bringing together

the international abolitionist movement. As a founding member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, ECPM organises the World Congress Against the Death Penalty every three years. ECPM supports the creation of national and regional coalitions, carries out educational activities for young people, conducts fact-finding missions on the realities of those sentenced to death, and provides capacity-building support to local stakeholders.



Droits et Paix

Droits et Paix is a Cameroonian organisation working to promote a fairer and more peaceful society that respects human rights. Its main objectives are the protection and promotion of fundamental human rights and individual freedoms, initiatives to foster peace and non-violence, and the humanisation and improvement of prison conditions in Cameroon. The organisation's main activities include providing legal and judicial assistance to victims of human rights violations, developing media strategies, organising workshops and seminars, and educating young people. The organisation is a member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty.



The Network of Cameroonian Lawyers Against the Death Penalty (RACOPEM)

The Network of Cameroonian Lawyers Against the Death Penalty (RACOPEM) is a Cameroonian association that campaigns for the respect of human rights, and in particular the right to life, in Cameroon. Founded in July 2015, its primary objectives are to coordinate national and international efforts towards the universal abolition of the death penalty, promote respect for human rights in the administration of justice, provide legal aid to vulnerable people, and mobilise lawyers and other legal professionals committed to the abolition of the death penalty in order to share and strengthen their capacities regarding abolition strategies. In November 2022, RACOPEM won the Defence Award at the 8th World Congress Against the Death Penalty in Berlin.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ALNK	<i>Armée de Libération Nationale Kamerunaise</i> (National Liberation Army of Kamerun)
CHRC	Cameroon Human Rights Commission
F.CFA	CFA franc (CFA stands for <i>Communauté financière africaine</i> , i.e. African Financial Community)
FIACAT	<i>Fédération internationale des ACAT</i> (International Federation of ACATs - Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture)
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
MRC	<i>Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun</i> (Cameroon Renaissance Movement)
NMPT	National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture
OPCAT	Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture
RACOPEM	<i>Réseau des avocats camerounais contre la peine de mort</i> (Cameroonian Network of Lawyers Against the Death Penalty)
UPC	Union of the Peoples of Cameroon
WCADP	World Coalition Against the Death Penalty

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FOREWORD

Maître Claude Assira Engouté

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On 20 March 2026, the Mfoundi High Court in Yaoundé sentenced Mr Dagobert Nwafo to death by firing squad for what was characterised as the murder of six-year-old Mathis, in retaliation for a dispute with the victim's father.

This sentence was met with approval and relief by much of Cameroonian society. Yet the death penalty violates a fundamental right guaranteed by numerous legal texts: the right to life. It constitutes cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, prohibited by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In reality, the situation regarding the death penalty in Cameroon is complex, both in law and in practice.

Legally speaking, although Cameroon's 1996 Constitution, revised in 2008 and again on 4 April 2026, does not explicitly mention the death penalty, but rather guarantees the right to life and to physical and moral integrity, Cameroonian legislation retains the death penalty. This has notably been maintained in the 2016 Penal Code for at least eleven offences, such as murder or aggravated theft, as well as in the 2014 Counter-Terrorism Law. While Cameroon has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it has not acceded to the Second Optional Protocol aiming at the abolition of the death penalty.

In practice, whilst Cameroon observes a de facto moratorium (the last execution took place in 1997), the death penalty is still prescribed for the crimes mentioned above. However, none of the arguments put forward by Cameroon appear to justify the retention of capital punishment.

- Regarding terrorism and national security: The death penalty has not shown to be an effective deterrent to terrorism. In fact, it may even fuel radicalisation and hatred. Countries that have abolished the death penalty have not seen a rise in terrorist attacks.

- Regarding murder and high treason: The death penalty is a disproportionate and irreversible response to these crimes. Judicial errors are possible, and once the execution has taken place, it cannot be undone. Other sentences, such as life imprisonment, can ensure public safety without resorting to the death penalty.
- Regarding the irreversible infringement of the right to life: The Constitution of Cameroon enshrines the right to life, rendering the death penalty incompatible with this fundamental right. Cameroon has ratified international treaties that recognise this fundamental right.

In short, arguments in favour of retaining the death penalty do not withstand scrutiny in light of principles such as justice, human dignity and the right to life.

Furthermore, Cameroon is out of step with the growing trend towards abolition across Africa. Several other African states have already abolished the death penalty, including Chad (in 2020), Sierra Leone (in 2021), the Central African Republic (in 2022), Ghana (in 2023), Zambia (in 2023) and Zimbabwe (in 2024). Other countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, have joined the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty.

As of 2026, Cameroon remains one of only two Central African states, alongside the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to retain the death penalty in its arsenal of punishment. It is therefore time for Cameroon to follow the example of its neighbours and take concrete steps to abolish this punishment because, let us be clear, the death penalty is a barbaric practice that represents the failure of society and of justice. It violates fundamental human rights. Consequently, when the abolition of capital punishment is advocated, it is to ensure respect for human dignity and to move away from a justice system based on revenge.

Furthermore, we must not lose sight of a major problem that plagues the judicial system in Cameroon: torture, particularly in death penalty cases. In Cameroon, as noted in this report, cases of torture and ill-treatment have been documented both during the preliminary investigation and whilst in custody, raising concerns about the risk of forced confessions and, ultimately, wrongful convictions. This is a vicious circle that can lead to the execution of innocent people. Perhaps, we should put mechanisms in place to prevent torture and to ensure that people in detention have access to a lawyer and medical

care. This is a serious problem requiring urgent action. The prevention of torture and the protection of detainees' rights are essential to guaranteeing a fair trial and preventing miscarriages of justice. Urgent reforms should be considered to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and ensure transparency in proceedings.

As things stand, the conditions of detention for people sentenced to death in Cameroon are a real cause for concern from any perspective:

- Accommodation: Prisoners are held in overcrowded and unsanitary cells, with appalling hygiene conditions. At Maroua Prison, for example, between fifty and sixty people are held in cells measuring 20 m².
- Food: The prison authorities allocate an insufficient amount of approximately 431 F.CFA francs per day for each prisoner's food. Prisoners are given rice, corn or groundnuts for their meals, and do not receive any meat, fish, fruit or vegetables.
- Health: Medical care comes at a cost, and medicines are in short supply. Prisoners who fall ill are often left untreated.
- Work and activities: Prisoners have very limited access to sports activities and the library.
- Discipline: Prisoners are sometimes subjected to punishments, such as placement in a disciplinary cell, where they are chained and deprived of food.

The abolition of the death penalty is a step towards creating a fairer and more humane society. One alternative is life imprisonment with hard labour, which would enable prisoners to contribute to society while serving their sentences.

Civil society organisations and human rights groups are calling for the abolition of the death penalty and for the protocol to be ratified. There are many reasons for this: as the justice system is fallible, there is a real and irreparable risk of executing an innocent person. Furthermore, the death penalty is often applied arbitrarily, targeting ethnic minorities and the poor, and perpetuating the cycle of violence through its use as a tool of political repression. It removes any possibility of rehabilitation or reintegration for the convicted person. Studies even show that capital punishment is no more effective than life imprisonment in reducing crime. Finally, there is no evidence that it always guarantees peace for the victims' families. Cameroon could take inspiration from Ghana's approach, where the death penalty was abolished in 2023 after a vigorous campaign by civil society and parliamentarians. Efforts to advocate to

policymakers should be stepped up, as should efforts to raise public opinion about the benefits of abolition. Admittedly, it is not enough to simply say so. There will be obstacles and reluctance, either due to the personal convictions of certain political figures who regard the death penalty as an effective form of justice, or out of fear of upsetting a large section of the population who still support it. However, it is important to emphasise that it is the mark of a great leader to show the way, even when the path is difficult and steep. A leader worthy of the name does not follow the crowd. It is the crowd that follows him.

Another option would be to strengthen collaboration with civil society organisations and international institutions that campaign for the abolition of the death penalty. Cameroon could also consider amending its Criminal Code to remove capital punishment and replace it with alternative sentences, such as life imprisonment.

How should I, as a lawyer, approach my role representing people facing the death penalty in a society where the majority of the public considers it justified?

In a context where the death penalty is widely accepted by the public, lawyers play a crucial role in safeguarding fundamental rights. They must defend the rights of those facing trial, even if society judges them harshly. Justice must be administered fairly and impartially.

The lawyer must manage expectations, clearly explaining the risks and implications of the situation to those on trial, as well as the possible options. They must also ensure that those on trial fully understand their situation.

In order to prepare a robust defence, they will need to examine the evidence, witness statements and legal arguments in order to build an effective case. They must also highlight any mitigating circumstances and propose alternative sentences to the death penalty.

They must also educate the public and decision-makers about the issues surrounding the death penalty and fundamental rights, and raise awareness of them. Lawyers must not hesitate to participate in debates, conferences and awareness-raising campaigns. They should collaborate with organisations that defend human rights and campaign for the abolition of the death penalty, in order to benefit from their expertise and support.

In any case, a lawyer's role is to defend their clients, not to judge their actions. They should maintain a professional and respectful attitude at all times, even when dealing with challenging cases. As lawyers, we play a key role in ensuring that justice is administered

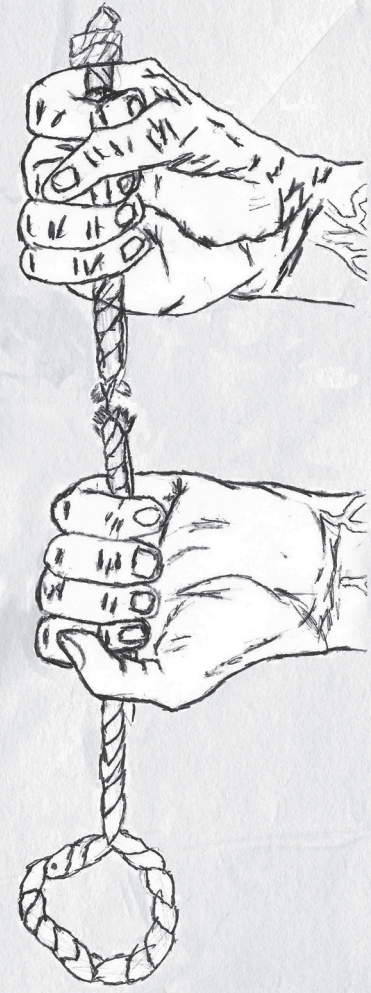
fairly and that the rights of those involved in legal proceedings are respected.

This report documents the findings of a fact-finding mission that explored the reasons why the death penalty is ineffective and morally reprehensible. It sheds light on the alarming situation of individuals sentenced to death, from their arrest to sentencing, and their living conditions in detention. The report also draws attention to shortcomings in the criminal justice system with regard to compliance with fair trial standards, thereby underscoring the system's fallibility. Abolishing the death penalty means rejecting barbarism, preventing fatal miscarriages of justice and prioritising human dignity.

In these uncertain times for humanity, this is certainly no luxury.

Maître Claude Assira Engouté

INTRODUCTION



A decade ago, in 2016, Cameroon was the French-speaking African country that imposed the highest number of death sentences.¹ Although the country has not carried out any executions since 1997, nearly 300 death sentences were handed down in 2015 and 2016, mainly for acts classified as terrorism under legislation that has been strongly criticised.² Drafted in highly imprecise terms, this law was initially presented as an instrument to combat terrorism, particularly the activities of Boko Haram in the Far North Region, before also being used in the political conflict between the central authorities and secessionist movements in the English-speaking regions.

The fact-finding mission report published in 2019 documented the violence and threats endured during preliminary investigations, the structural weakness of legal assistance, and the extremely poor detention conditions in which those sentenced to death were held, sometimes for several decades.³

This report examines developments since that earlier mission. While the death penalty continues not to be enforced, some changes are noticeable. As our detailed analysis shows, abolitionist actors report a decrease in the number of death sentences pronounced, and the growing involvement of Cameroonian civil society has led to the overturning of several death sentences on appeal. Some of those sentenced to death have also had their sentences commuted, although a large proportion have been denied this possibility, as the relevant decree excludes those convicted of acts classified as terrorism.

Beyond documenting these developments, the primary objective of this fact-finding mission report is to highlight the human tragedy that capital punishment represents. Through the accounts of people sentenced to death, as well as their families and lawyers, it sheds light on their trajectories through the criminal justice system and the harsh detention conditions in which they survive. Their words bear witness to the daily reality of this sentence, in some cases more than forty years after it was imposed.

This report is divided into five sections. The first sets out the methodology used and presents the profiles of the people sentenced to death interviewed. The second outlines the legal framework governing the death penalty in Cameroon. The third traces the history

1 ECPM database.

2 C. Berrih and N. Toko, *Sentenced to oblivion: Fact-finding mission on death row, Cameroon*, ECPM, 2019, p. 18.

3 C. Berrih and N. Toko, 2019, op. cit.

of the death penalty since independence, with a particular focus on the situation since the adoption of the 2014 counter-terrorism law and its impact on the number of death sentences imposed over the past decade. The fourth, drawing on the words of those directly affected, describes their often chaotic and sometimes violent journeys from arrest to the exhaustion of legal remedies. Finally, the fifth section examines the detention conditions in which they live on a daily basis.



METHODOLOGY

SELECTION OF PRISONS VISITED

Cameroon does not publish detailed data on the number of people sentenced to death, nor does it provide information on the facilities in which they are held.⁴ In the absence of official indications regarding their location, the research team had to establish its own criteria for selecting sites to visit from among the 76 operational prisons in the country.⁵

The mission first chose to return to the facilities visited during the previous investigation in order to ensure continuity with earlier observations and to assess changes over time. The mission was able to revisit all of these prisons.

The scope of the mission was then expanded to include facilities where the presence of people sentenced to death had been reported during the previous investigation, but which could not be accessed at the time for security reasons. This was notably the case of Buea prison, located in an English-speaking region, where the conflict between separatist groups and government forces prevented all access in 2018. The team also visited facilities known for their remoteness and for having held a significant number of political prisoners in the past, such as Yoko. The number of prisons visited therefore increased from five in 2018 to ten in 2025.

Despite efforts to further expand the scope of the investigation, some areas remained too unstable to allow for safe travel. Several facilities – notably Mantoum (Western Region) and Tcholiré (Northern Region), which have long occupied a prominent place in the Cameroonian public consciousness as sites of repression⁶ – could not be visited, despite the active support of local networks of lawyers. To our knowledge, the remoteness of these facilities, combined with the presence of armed groups along access routes, continues to prevent any external actors from reaching them.

⁴ This practice contravenes the United Nations Economic and Social Council Resolution of May 1989: United Nations Economic and Social Council, Resolution 1989/64 on implementation of the safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty, 1989.

⁵ Cameroon, National report submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21, A/HRC/WG.6/44/CMR/1, 2023, p. 15.

⁶ M. Morelle, *Yaoundé carcérale*, ENS Éditions, 2019 [online].

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

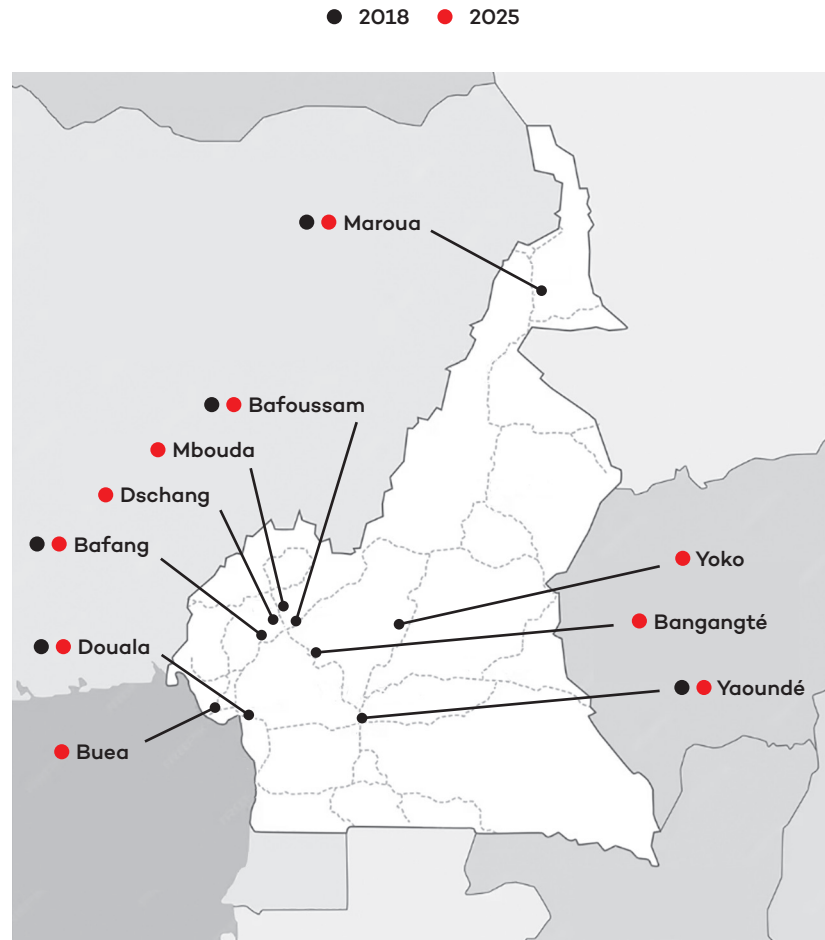
Data was collected by a team comprising lawyers from the *Réseau des avocats camerounais contre la peine de mort* (Cameroonian Network of Lawyers Against the Death Penalty – RACOPEM), a pastor, and a civil society representative, with one team member assigned to each locality. Forty-five individual interviews were conducted between January and October 2025 with people sentenced to death. More than a dozen additional interviews were conducted in prison with individuals who had been sentenced to death, but whose sentences had recently been commuted. For security reasons, none of the interviews were recorded; detailed notes were taken in all cases. The sample of individuals interviewed in prison is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample of the 2025 fact-finding mission

Prison	Number of persons sentenced to death in the prison	Number of persons sentenced to death interviewed ⁷	Number of persons with other sentences interviewed	Number of prison staff interviewed
Bafang	0	0		
Bafoussam	8	4		
Bangangté	2	2		1
Buea	4	3	7	1
Douala (New-Bell)	3	3		1
Dschang	3	3		1
Maroua	Around 60	18	1	
Mbouda	2	2	8	
Yaoundé	12	8		1
Yoko	3	2	2	1
TOTAL	Approx. 97	45	18	6

⁷ People once sentenced to death who have been granted a presidential pardon commuting their death sentence.

Map 1: Prisons visited during the fact-finding missions conducted in 2018 and 2025



Additional interviews were conducted with seven judges and prosecutors, twenty-one lawyers, ten family members of individuals sentenced to death, and ten representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

In order to prevent any reprisals against participants in the study, their names have been changed. Only the names of a small number of people sentenced to death whose situations require particular attention are mentioned; in these specific cases, the individuals concerned and their families gave their consent for the publication of their data.

These initial data show a clear decrease in the number of people sentenced to death in the prisons that were first visited in 2018, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Changes in the number of persons sentenced to death in prisons visited in 2018 and 2025

Prison	2018	2025
Bafang	2	0
Bafoussam	19	8
Douala	7	3
Maroua	157	Around 60
Yaoundé	22	12

Three main factors may explain this trend. Firstly, in several cases, the exercise of legal remedies, particularly with the support of abolitionist Cameroonian lawyers belonging to RACOPEM,⁸ resulted in death sentences being overturned, or even in acquittals. Secondly, the 2020 presidential decree, issued during the COVID-19 pandemic, led to the release of a number of individuals sentenced to death. This decree is discussed in greater detail below.⁹ Finally, in several cases, the decrease is due to the death in custody of individuals sentenced to death. At least one such case was identified: Pierre Saah, who died in 2020 in Bafang prison. After interviewing him in 2018, the earlier fact-finding mission expressed deep concern about his situation, noting in particular that his case file appeared to have been misplaced. He was 78 years old at the time.¹⁰

⁸ See *infra*, Box, Part “Trends in death sentences in Cameroon”.

⁹ See *infra*, Part “Difficult access to legal remedies”.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

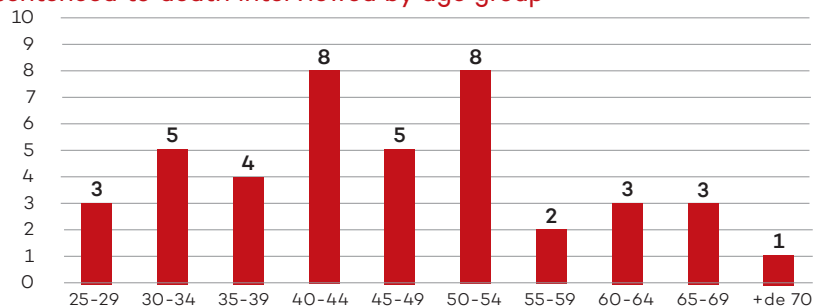
► PROFILE OF INDIVIDUALS SENTENCED TO DEATH INTERVIEWED

Almost all the people sentenced to death interviewed were men. Only one woman sentenced to death was identified in the prisons visited. For confidentiality reasons, her place of detention is not disclosed.¹¹ Since the previous fact-finding mission, several women have had their sentences commuted or have been acquitted on appeal. Among those interviewed, 82% had not yet received their final judgment. The majority still had a legal remedy pending: 27% were at the appeal stage, 53% were involved in *cassation* proceedings (awaiting a decision on petitions on points of law) and 2% were in opposition proceedings.¹² As discussed in more detail below, these figures show that in most cases legal remedies are actively pursued. However, when viewed in the context of the length of time these people have been detained, they also highlight the slowness of post-conviction proceedings, which leaves many of those sentenced to death in a prolonged state of uncertainty. Only 18% of the sample had received a final judgment.

Socio-demographic data

The study revealed a wide age range among people sentenced to death in Cameroon. The median age of those interviewed was 46; the youngest was 25 and the oldest 71.¹³

Figure 1: Number of persons sentenced to death interviewed by age group



11 This case concerns a woman sentenced to death at first instance, whose case is currently pending before the Court of Appeal.

12 This procedure allows a person tried in absentia to have the judgment overturned and the case retried.

13 N=42.

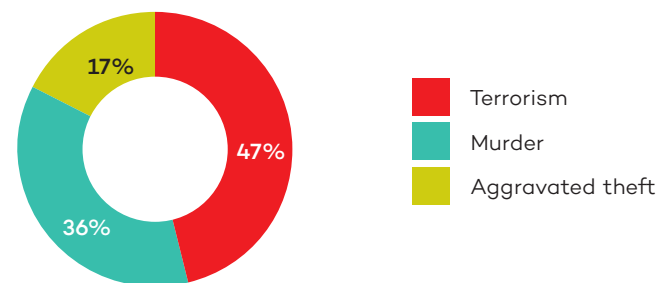
Eighty-seven per cent of those interviewed were Cameroonian nationals, while the remaining 13% were Nigerian nationals¹⁴ (all of whom were interviewed at Maroua prison in the Far North Region of Cameroon).¹⁵ Several interviewees also reported the presence in Maroua prison of individuals sentenced to death for acts classified as terrorism who were of Chadian nationality. However, the mission was unable to meet with them, as access to detainees is entirely dependent on the prison authorities.

Grounds for incarceration

Terrorism-related offences were by far the most common grounds for conviction among those interviewed. As shown in Figure 2, 47% of interviewees were sentenced to death on terrorism-related charges.¹⁶ This includes all individuals sentenced to death in Buea as well as in Maroua, in the Far North Region – including all those of Nigerian nationality.

Among those sentenced for offences other than terrorism, homicide is the most common offence (36%), followed by aggravated theft without homicide (17%). As discussed further below, from 1972 until the 1990 reform aggravated theft carried a mandatory death sentence.¹⁷ Today, the death penalty is no longer mandatory in such cases, and aggravated theft is only constituted where it has resulted in death or serious injury.

Figure 2: Grounds for incarceration of persons sentenced to death interviewed



14 N=45.

15 See *infra*, Part “Profile of individuals sentenced to death interviewed”.

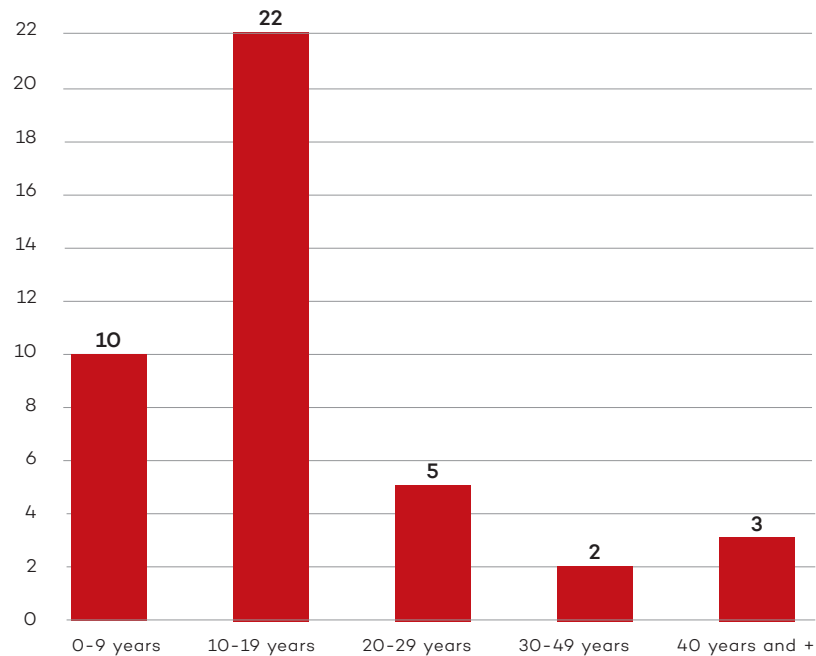
16 N=45.

17 See *infra*, Part “Brief history of the death penalty since independence”.

Time spent in detention

The length of time spent in detention after sentencing varies considerably, as shown in Figure 3. On average, interviewees had been sentenced fourteen years prior to the fact-finding mission. However, situations differ widely: some prisoners had been sentenced to death three years before the interview,¹⁸ while others had spent more than forty years behind bars.¹⁹

Figure 3: Time spent in detention by persons sentenced to death interviewed



18 In connection with the Kumba school case – see *infra*, Parts “The death penalty as a political tool since independence” and “The criminal justice system: a chain of black holes”.

19 At the time of their sentence, most were in their thirties, although some were significantly younger: one of them was only 18 years old.

SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR MORE THAN FORTY YEARS²⁰

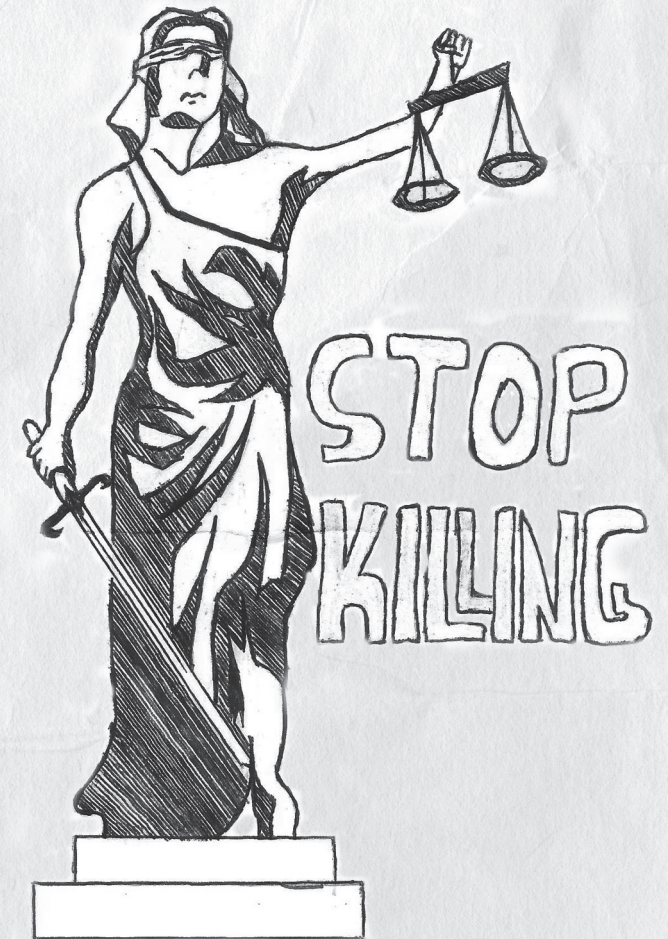
André Nguenji was sentenced to death for robbery when he was 25 years old. He has been in detention for 40 years and is currently held in Bafoussam prison. He is now over 65 years old. **Bienvenu Onguéné** was convicted of illegal possession of weapons and murder. He is currently detained at Yaoundé prison. In 2016, he was the subject of a report, which won an award from the French Embassy in Cameroon.²¹ Now aged 71, having spent 41 years in detention, he is the oldest of all the people sentenced to death interviewed, following the death of Pierre Saah.²² **Fabien Tsafack**, held in Dschang prison, has been detained for 43 years. He was convicted of aggravated theft when he was only 19 years old; he is now 62. Since the visit of the fact-finding mission, another person sentenced to death more than 40 years ago has been detained in Dschang prison: **Philippe Dongmo**, also sentenced to death for aggravated theft, whose petition (raising points of law) was lodged in 1987.

20 Permission to quote the individuals concerned has been expressly granted by their families.

21 Christian Thouani, “*Condamné à mort à la prison centrale de Yaoundé. Bienvenu Onguéné : Je vis mes arrêts de match*” (Sentenced to death at Yaoundé Central Prison. Bienvenu Onguéné: “I’m living in extra time”), 2016. The report received an award for the best written report on the international situation of the death penalty.

22 See *supra*, Part “Profile of individuals sentenced to death interviewed”.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING THE DEATH PENALTY IN CAMEROON



THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE CONSTITUTION OF CAMEROON

“Every person has the right to life, to physical and moral integrity and to humane treatment in all circumstances.”

Preamble to the Constitution of Cameroon

The Preamble to the Constitution of Cameroon unequivocally affirms that every person has the right to life. By enshrining this principle in the Constitution, the Cameroonian state establishes the protection of life as one of the foundations of its legal order.²³ The Constitution makes no reference to the death penalty.

This general principle is accompanied by an explicit commitment to the fundamental freedoms set out in international instruments,²⁴ to which the Constitution accords superior legal authority.²⁵ Cameroon has thus ratified numerous international conventions, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its First Optional Protocol, thereby incorporating extensive human rights guarantees into its legal framework. However, it has not acceded to the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty.²⁶

Notwithstanding the Constitution’s commitment to the protection of fundamental rights, capital punishment is maintained in criminal law to this day, making Cameroon one of only two countries in Central Africa, alongside Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to retain the death penalty in its legislative arsenal.

23 Article 65 of the Constitution provides that the Preamble is an integral part of the Constitution.

24 Preamble, Constitution.

25 Article 45, Constitution.

26 See Annex 1 for the list of international and regional instruments ratified by Cameroon.

OFFENCES PUNISHABLE BY DEATH

The scope of the death penalty has expanded significantly over the past decade, and Cameroonian law now provides for this punishment for around 30 offences. The 2016 Penal Code alone lists eleven offences carrying the death penalty. Rather than reducing the list of crimes punishable by death inherited from the previous version, this recent reform reaffirmed the central role of capital punishment in the country’s punitive framework, even though its imposition is no longer mandatory.²⁷

The expansion stems mainly from several sector-specific laws. A 2014 counter-terrorism law introduced provisions carrying the death penalty, not only for perpetrators of acts of terrorism, but also for persons recognised as accomplices. Adopting a particularly broad definition of terrorism, this law makes acts such as “recruiting and/or training people to participate in acts of terrorism” or “laundering the proceeds of terrorism” punishable by death.²⁸

In 2016, the law on chemical weapons added several offences that carry a death sentence. In 2017, the law on civil aviation security further expanded the circumstances in which the death penalty may be imposed.²⁹

Finally, although the 2017 revision of the Code of Military Justice removed three crimes from the list of those punishable by death,³⁰ the death penalty is included in this text for a number of offences, including desertion, treason and espionage.

However, under the ICCPR, ratified by Cameroon in 1984, the death penalty may only be applied for “the most serious crimes”.³¹ In its General Comment No. 36 (2019), the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee underlines that this term must be interpreted restrictively, appertaining only to crimes of extreme gravity involving

27 The death penalty may be commuted to a ten-year prison sentence if the court recognises mitigating circumstances, unless these are formally excluded by law: Articles 90 and 91, Penal Code.

28 Articles 4 and 5, Law 2014/028 of 23 December 2014.

29 Former Law No. 2001/19 of 19 December 2001 required that the offence result in the death of persons on the ground or in flight. This condition is no longer included in the law adopted in 2017.

30 Abandonment of post in the presence of the enemy, wilful mutilation in the presence of the enemy, and attempted destruction of immovable property intended for military use.

31 Article 6, ICCPR.

intentional killing. Several offences that remain punishable by death in Cameroon – such as laundering the proceeds of terrorism, desertion or treason – do not meet this criterion.³²

32 United Nations Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 on Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: right to life, CCPR/C/GC/36, 2019, §35.

CATEGORIES OF PERSONS EXCLUDED FROM THE DEATH PENALTY AND EXECUTION

Cameroonian law excludes certain categories of persons from capital punishment. In principle, pregnant women are protected, as their execution may only take place after childbirth.³³ Under the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Cameroon has an obligation to ensure that no death sentence is imposed on mothers of infants or young children.³⁴ In addition, persons with mental disorders or dementia cannot be sentenced to death.³⁵ However, as discussed further below, several individuals currently sentenced to death have serious mental disorders.³⁶

Minors are also excluded from the scope of the death penalty.³⁷ In practice, however, sentences have recently been imposed on individuals under the age of 18, using so-called “apparent age” certificates that deliberately overstate the age of defendants. These practices have become particularly widespread in the context of the fight against terrorism. Such sentences have subsequently been overturned by appellate courts. For example, Marie Dawandala, Damaris Doukouya and Martha Weteya, who were 17 years old when they were arrested in October 2014 in the Far North Region and accused of supporting Boko Haram, were sentenced to death in April 2016 for espionage, conspiracy to commit insurrection and membership in an armed gang. They were finally acquitted in October 2020.³⁸

The legislation does not contain any specific provisions on foreign nationals. As no distinction is made on the basis of the nationality of the accused, foreign nationals remain fully exposed to the death penalty, as discussed further below.

33 Article 22(3), Penal Code.

34 Article 30(e), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, ratified by Cameroon in 1997.

35 Articles 44 and 78, Penal Code, together with Article 371, Code of Criminal Procedure.

36 See *infra*, Part “Courts that do not hear, defences without a voice”.

37 Articles 80 and 87, Penal Code.

38 ECPM, RACOPEM, WCADP, *La peine de mort au Cameroun. Rapport conjoint pour la 44^e session du groupe de travail sur l'examen périodique universel* (The Death Penalty in Cameroon. Joint Report for the 44th Session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review), November 2023, §§28–29.

METHODS OF EXECUTION

Article 23 of the Penal Code provides for two methods of execution: hanging or firing squad. The choice of method is determined by the sentencing judgment, which sets out the terms of execution. This provision also specifies that executions must, in principle, take place in public, unless the decision rejecting an application for clemency provides otherwise. After the execution, the body of the person sentenced to death may be released to the family upon request, who are then responsible for burial.

HARDENING OF THE CAMEROONIAN AUTHORITIES' POSITION AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Since 1997, Cameroon has applied a de facto moratorium on executions but has so far refused to formalise it. Since the late 2000s, this position has been reflected in systematic abstention in votes on resolutions of the UN General Assembly calling for a universal moratorium.

This position has been strongly reaffirmed in recent years. In 2024, during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Cameroon did not accept any of the 12 recommendations related to the abolition of capital punishment.³⁹ In November 2024, within the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, Cameroon aligned itself with retentionist states, supporting an amendment put forward by Singapore, Egypt and several other delegations reaffirming the “sovereign right” of all countries to develop their own legal systems, including determining appropriate legal penalties.⁴⁰ Finally, in December 2024, during the plenary vote on the tenth resolution calling for a universal moratorium on executions, Cameroon once again abstained. Despite record support for this resolution (130 votes in favour, 32 against and 22 abstentions), Cameroon confirmed its refusal to commit to making progress towards abolition. This stance contrasts with that of several African states which, in recent years, have taken the step of total abolition or adopted major legislative reforms in that direction. In Central Africa, only Cameroon and DRC have yet to abolish the death penalty.

³⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Addendum, Views on conclusions and/or recommendations, voluntary commitments and replies presented by the State under review, A/HRC/55/16/Add.1, 2024.

⁴⁰ United Nations, “Texts on Trafficking in Women and Girls, Death Penalty Moratorium among 9 Draft Resolutions Approved by Third Committee”, 18 November 2024.

THE DEATH PENALTY AS A POLITICAL TOOL SINCE INDEPENDENCE



LA PÊCHE À MORT

This section traces the key stages in the history of the death penalty in Cameroon, showing how, since independence, this punishment has been used as an instrument of political control and legitimisation.⁴¹

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEATH PENALTY SINCE INDEPENDENCE

1959-1971: THE DEATH PENALTY AT THE CORE OF THE AHMADOU AHIDJO REGIME

During the first decade after independence, even though the 1961 Constitution proclaimed Cameroon's commitment to the fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the United Nations, the death penalty was central to Ahmadou Ahidjo's political project. Under the guise of building national unity, the regime repressed all dissent, particularly that of the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC), the main nationalist movement whose *maquisards* (resistance fighters) continued their struggle underground.

Executions carried out in the 1960s illustrate the use of capital punishment against those considered "internal enemies".⁴² Pierre Ninyim Kamdem, a traditional Baham chief close to the UPC, was arrested in 1963, sentenced to death and executed by firing squad in January 1964.⁴³ The same year, Noé Tankeu, commander of the *Armée de Libération Nationale Kamerunaise* (National Liberation Army of Kamerun – ALNK) – the armed wing of the UPC – was tried by a military court and executed.⁴⁴ In 1970, the arrest of Ernest Ouandié, the last major leader of the UPC, marked the end of the *maquis* (armed resistance struggle). His trial concluded on 5 January 1971 with a death sentence for rebellion; he was executed by firing squad ten days later, alongside two other militants.⁴⁵

41 For more details on the history, see C. Berrih and N. Toko, 2019, *op. cit.*

42 P. C. Belomo Essono, *L'ordre et la sécurité publics dans la construction de l'État au Cameroun* (Public order and security in the construction of the state in Cameroon), Bordeaux Institute of Political Studies; Montesquieu-Bordeaux University IV, 2007, p. 257.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, p. 360.

45 Ernest Ouandié was rehabilitated in 1991 and declared a national hero by the National Assembly of Cameroon twenty years later.

In this context, the 1965 and 1967 laws establishing the first Penal Code applicable throughout the entire federal territory, enshrined the death penalty for around ten offences, particularly related to state security.⁴⁶ The death penalty was thus a foundational instrument of power, intended to reinforce the regime's authority and neutralise opposition.

1972: MANDATORY IMPOSITION OF THE DEATH PENALTY FOR "BANDITRY"

In the early 1970s, as the period of armed clashes linked to the *maquis* came to an end and political violence declined, the authorities identified organised banditry (*grand banditisme*) as the new threat to national stability.⁴⁷ President Ahidjo embarked on harsh reforms of the criminal justice system: the Ordinance of 28 September 1972 on combating insecurity placed the death penalty at the centre of criminal policy.⁴⁸ Aggravated theft – defined as any theft committed with violence, by breaking and entering, unlawful entry through climbing or with the use of a vehicle – became punishable by death, with no possibility for judges to reduce the sentence. The retroactive application of these provisions, in violation of the principles of criminal law, made it possible to prosecute and sentence individuals for acts committed before the law entered into force. While the full consequences of this legislation remain difficult to assess – since there is no reliable data on the number of executions for aggravated theft between 1972 and the law's revision in 1990 – the fact-finding mission met with a person who had been sentenced to death in 1982 under this framework and was still in detention. Although the law was later amended, death sentences imposed under the former legislation were not reviewed.

1983-1984: THE DEATH PENALTY AS A RESPONSE TO INTERNAL POWER STRUGGLES

In 1982, the resignation of Ahmadou Ahidjo – officially for health reasons – and the accession of Paul Biya to the presidency ushered in a fragile period of transition. The following year, the authorities

46 Penal Code established by Laws No. 65-LF-24 of 12 November 1965 and No. 67-LF-1 of June 1967.

47 P. C. Belomo Essono, 2007, *op. cit.*, pp. 442-443.

48 Ordonnance No. 72/16 of 28 September 1972.

announced that they had uncovered a plot to assassinate the head of state. The former president, then living in France, was accused of conspiracy. The military court in Yaoundé sentenced him and two of his close associates to death. A few days later, Paul Biya commuted their sentences to life imprisonment.⁴⁹ As Pélagie Chantal Belomo Essono notes, this gesture enabled the new president to instrumentalise clemency in order to present himself as a guarantor of conciliation and national unity.⁵⁰ Paul Biya, still head of state more than 43 years later, would subsequently make presidential clemency a recurring tool of governance.

In 1984, members of the Republican Guard who remained loyal to Ahidjo were accused of leading a coup d'état. Between 27 and 30 April, dozens of individuals alleged to have taken part were tried by a military court and sentenced to death. Around 50 executions were reported that same year, in addition to 25 deaths in detention between 1984 and 1988.

Towards the end of 1984, the wave of executions came to an end. According to official data, the death penalty was then only applied in one case during the remainder of the decade, in 1988, for crimes involving bloodshed with aggravating circumstances.⁵¹

► 1990: CONTROLLED LIBERALISATION, REDEFINING, WITHOUT ABOLISHING, THE DEATH PENALTY

By the end of the 1980s, Cameroon was facing growing pressure to reform its political system. Social mobilisation, demands for democracy and the international context prompted the authorities to adopt a package of laws in 1990, during a session of the National Assembly referred to as the “the session of freedoms”. The opening up of the political arena was accompanied by a revision of the controversial 1972 provision that punished aggravated theft with the death penalty. Under Law 90/061 of 19 December 1990, the death penalty could henceforth be imposed only when violence results in death or serious injury. The application of mitigating circumstances is no longer prohibited.

49 Encyclopaedia Universalis, 23–28 février 1984 – Cameroun. *Condamnation à mort par contumace de l'ancien président Ahmadou Ahidjo* (23–28 February 1984 – Cameroon. Death sentence in absentia for former President Ahmadou Ahidjo).

50 P. C. Belomo Essono, 2007, op. cit., p. 264.

51 Cameroon, Second periodic reports of States parties due in 1990, CCPR/C/63/Add.1, 1993.

The last known execution took place on 9 January 1997, when Antoine Vandi Tize was executed by firing squad in Mokolo, in the department of Mayo-Tsanaga (Far North Region). Convicted of murder, he had been detained for approximately seven years in Maroua Central Prison.⁵²

Thereafter, the country entered a period of de facto moratorium on the death penalty, an ambiguous situation in which the executions are suspended but the death penalty remains enshrined in law, with courts continuing to impose death sentences.

► SINCE 2014: EXTENSION OF THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE CONTEXT OF COUNTER-TERRORISM AND BEYOND

The rise of Boko Haram in the Far North Region led to a tightening of the security framework. In 2014, Cameroon adopted counter-terrorism legislation, which considerably broadened the range of offences punishable by death.⁵³ The notions of “membership of” or “support for” an armed group are defined very broadly, allowing for the criminalisation of non-violent conduct, including mere damage to property. The law also authorises the detention of suspects for up to 15 days, renewable without limit; makes prosecution and penalties not subject to limitation periods; and grants jurisdiction to military courts, including for the trial of civilians, raising serious concerns about the independence of the justice system.

This legislation has been applied extensively in the Far North Region:⁵⁴ in 2015 and 2016, the Maroua military court alone handed down more than 290 death sentences.⁵⁵ At the time of the previous fact-finding mission in 2018, nearly 150 people sentenced to death for alleged membership of the Boko Haram movement were being held at Maroua Central Prison.⁵⁶ In 2025, the fact-finding mission interviewed 18 people sentenced to death in that prison, all convicted of terrorism-related offences.

Beyond this context, the use of the counter-terrorism law has been renewed in response to political tensions in the English-speaking

52 Amnesty International, *Cameroon: Blatant disregard for human rights*, 1997, p. 41.

53 Law No. 2014/28 of 23 December 2014 on the suppression of acts of terrorism.

54 In addition, the death penalty was also sought in 2015 against a journalist, Ahmed Abba, a correspondent for Radio France Internationale, who was prosecuted for covering the activities of Boko Haram. He was ultimately sentenced to 24 months in prison on appeal.

55 Annual reports of the Ministry of Justice on human rights in Cameroon. Amnesty International, *Death Sentences and Executions 2016*, ACT 50/5740/2017, 2017, p. 37.

56 C. Berrih and N. Toko, 2019, op. cit.

regions, where a separatist movement claiming independence for the “Republic of Ambazonia” has been gaining momentum since 2016, referred to as the Anglophone Crisis. Several hundred people have been arrested and accused of membership of this movement. Civil society has documented discriminatory practices targeting English-speaking populations, including illegal phone searches and the use of simple messages, photographs or comments related to the crisis as incriminating evidence. More than 1,500 English-speaking individuals have been prosecuted for terrorism, secession or hostilities against the homeland, all offences punishable by death. At Buea prison, the fact-finding mission interviewed several individuals sentenced to death for terrorism who were accused of being Ambazonian separatists.

Counter-terrorism legislation has also been used to carry out arbitrary arrests and silence dissenting voices, particularly those critical of the authorities’ handling of the Anglophone Crisis. In 2019, political opponents, including Maurice Kamto and several leaders of the *Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun* (Cameroon Renaissance Movement – MRC), were prosecuted under the 2014 law. Although Maurice Kamto and two of his allies were released after nine months in detention, several MRC activists were charged on the same grounds and are still awaiting trial.

At the same time, the new Code of Military Justice, promulgated on 12 July 2017, maintains the death penalty for several offences, including treason, collusion with the enemy and espionage.⁵⁷ It also strengthens the nationwide reach of military courts by establishing a military court in each of Cameroon’s ten regions.

57 Articles 61, 62 and 63, Law No. 2017/12 of 12 July 2017 to lay down the Code of Military Justice.

TRENDS IN DEATH SENTENCES IN CAMEROON

Assessing trends in the use of the death penalty in Cameroon remains difficult due to the authorities’ marked lack of transparency on the issue. This opacity, which seems to reflect a resolve to maintain secrecy around death sentences, severely limits access to reliable data. During the examination of Cameroon’s state report at the 67th ordinary session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights in 2023, the authorities nevertheless indicated that as of 31 October 2020, 120 people were sentenced to death, including 80 Cameroonian men, 36 foreign nationals and 4 women.⁵⁸ According to abolitionist actors, as of the end of 2025, an estimated 130 individuals were sentenced to death.

With regard to new death sentences, there has been a decline in the use of capital punishment since 2018. No death sentences were recorded between 2018 and 2020. From 2021 to 2024, one death sentence was documented each year, with the exception of 2021. That year, four men were sentenced to death by the Buea military court, in the South-West Region. They were found guilty of terrorism-related offences, hostility towards the homeland, insurrection, secession, killing and other offences, and sentenced to death by firing squad following trial proceedings widely criticised for procedural flaws.⁵⁹ They were prosecuted in connection with the attack on 24 October 2020 on the Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Kumba, in which seven students were killed and a dozen others wounded.⁶⁰ Some of those convicted, who are detained at Buea prison, were interviewed by the fact-finding mission.⁶¹

This decline in the number of death sentences imposed has been accompanied by a decrease in the number of individuals sentenced to death in Cameroonian prisons, which can be explained by two factors in particular: firstly, the increasing review on appeal of decisions handed down in cases related to Boko Haram in the Far

58 ECPM, RACOPEM, WOADP, 2023, op. cit., §24.

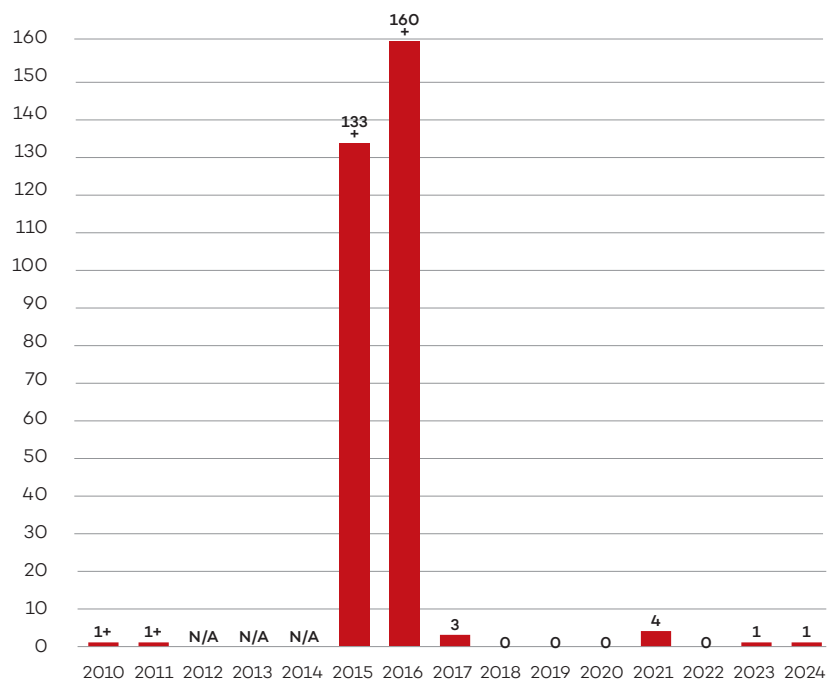
59 Human Rights Watch, “Cameroon: Sham Trial for Kumba School Massacre,” 2021.

60 Ministry of Justice, Report on Human Rights in Cameroon in 2021, 2022, p. 38.

61 See *infra*, Parts “The Criminal Justice System: A Chain of Black Holes” and “Detention Conditions of People Sentenced to Death in Cameroon”.

North Region has led to the quashing of several death sentences⁶² – most notably as a result of the decisive intervention of abolitionist lawyers, in particular members of RACOPEM and the NGO *Droits et Paix*; secondly, a presidential clemency decree adopted in 2020 commuted the death sentences of many individuals, albeit under opaque conditions, which are examined further below.⁶³

Figure 4: Trends in documented death sentences (2010-2024)⁶⁴



62 ECPM, “Cameroonian Lawyer Nestor Toko Monkam Secures the Liberation of Death Row Prisoner Fati,” 2023. Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide, “Cameroon: Targeting Girls Fleeing Terrorist Violence,” 2020.

63 See *infra*, Part “Difficult access to legal remedies”.

64 Data for 2016-2024: *Droits et Paix* and ECPM. Data for 2010-2014: Amnesty International: *Annual reports on death sentences and executions*. Ministry of Justice, Report on Human Rights in Cameroon in 2015, 2016, p. 282.

Reduction in the number of people sentenced to death in Cameroon

2018-2019	2025
Abolitionist actors estimated that 330 people were sentenced to death, including more than 100 for terrorism-related offences. ⁶⁵ At least three women convicted of terrorism were detained together with children under the age of 4.	According to abolitionist actors, approximately 130 people were sentenced to death in Cameroonian prisons. Several women sentenced to death for terrorism-related offences were subsequently acquitted on appeal. Only one woman sentenced to death at first instance and currently awaiting the outcome of an appeal was identified in the prisons visited.

CAMEROONIAN ABOLITIONIST ACTORS AT THE FOREFRONT OF DEFENDING INDIVIDUALS SENTENCED TO DEATH

For more than ten years, lawyers from RACOPEM have been providing legal support to people sentenced to death in Cameroon. Between 2016 and 2024, members of the association succeeded in securing the overturning of death sentences for 47 individuals. For this crucial work, RACOPEM received the Legal Representation Award at the 8th World Congress Against the Death Penalty in Berlin in November 2022, demonstrating international recognition of its contribution to the abolition of the death penalty worldwide.

65 RACOPEM, “Communiqué du RACOPEM à l’occasion de la 16^e Journée mondiale contre la peine de mort” (RACOPEM press release on the 16th World Day Against the Death Penalty), 10 October 2018.

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: A CHAIN OF BLACK HOLES



HASTY ARRESTS

The accounts of individuals sentenced to death reveal arrests characterised by haste and a presumption of guilt, sometimes based on appearance, location, language or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This is particularly evident in arrests for terrorism linked to the Anglophone Crisis. Several people interviewed at Buea prison said they had been arrested because of what they represented in the eyes of the security forces. Brice recounted that the authorities were “looking for anyone suspected of being Ambazonian”. A motorcycle taxi driver, he says he was arrested because of an inscription on his motorcycle, even though he was at the hospital with his four-month-old child at the time of the events. He said: “I didn’t even have a chance to explain myself or make myself heard because they considered me to be Ambazonian, even though I’m not.”

Others, such as Hermann and Rodrigue, described profiling based on their language, community or appearance. Rodrigue was accused of being one of the perpetrators of the Kumba school massacre, although he claims not to know the site of the events. Some admitted to having supported the separatist cause, but contested the charges against them. Martin, for example, maintained that he was primarily an “informant” and denied the murder charges against him.

This logic of suspicion within the framework of counter-terrorism is not limited to the English-speaking regions. In the Far North Region, several witnesses described chaotic arrests. Nasiru recounted that he was arrested “on the spot” while visiting his father and brother, who had themselves been arrested by the military. He was 18 years old at the time. Ado said he was arrested because of a ring, which was interpreted as a sign of membership of an armed group. Haruna stated that he was arrested because, as a refugee, he did not have a national identity card; he insisted that he has “no connection with Boko Haram”. Other accounts relating to earlier periods show that such arbitrariness is not limited to the recent security context. In Dschang prison, Fabien recounted his arrest in 1982, at the age of 19, after renting a radio set to provide music for end-of-year festivities in his village. Accused of handling stolen goods, he said he was “beaten” by the security forces during his arrest. He has so far spent 43 years in detention.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ On Fabien’s case, see also *supra*, Part “Trends in death sentences in Cameroon”.

CONSTRUCTION OF GUILT BEFORE TRIAL

▶ ABSENCE OF LEGAL COUNSEL DURING INVESTIGATION

In line with the 2018 findings, data collected in 2025 indicated that the preliminary investigation is a decisive stage in the criminal proceedings against individuals sentenced to death. It is at this stage that suspects are questioned for the first time and that statements are recorded in the case file. Yet, very few individuals are assisted by a lawyer during this phase: 95% of those interviewed stated that they were questioned without a lawyer present, in many cases without even knowing that they had the right to request one.⁶⁷ Cameroonian criminal procedural law clearly states the right to legal representation during investigations and questioning, but it relies on the accused to take active steps to request one. As one lawyer interviewed explained, “Not everyone is aware of this right, and criminal investigation officers take advantage of this to deprive some people of the presence of a lawyer.” The lack of awareness of procedural safeguards is a major factor in the absence of legal assistance. Cédric, who at the time of interview had been sentenced to death for 17 years, summarised: “No one asked me whether I needed a lawyer.” Without legal counsel, the arrested person is effectively isolated and does not understand their rights or the significance of what is taking place.

Even in the rare cases where a lawyer is appointed, strategies are deployed to prevent them from assisting their client. One lawyer explained: “I had difficulties assisting my client during the preliminary investigation because the investigators did not want me to. They used various strategies to question him in my absence, either during the night or with the promise of release, and it was a trap.”

The absence of a lawyer at this stage opens the door to coercive practices, whether direct physical violence, threats or manoeuvres aimed at obtaining the signing of statements, sometimes without the persons concerned having fully understood their content.

⁶⁷ N=44.

► COERCIVE PRACTICES AND FABRICATED ACCOUNTS

Violence endured during the preliminary investigation was a striking finding of the mission. Of the 45 individuals interviewed, twenty-two reported having been tortured, representing 49% of the sample. As one lawyer explained, “The investigative method commonly used is torture, even though it is prohibited and punishable by law.” Such violence occurs at the very moment when official statements are drawn up and signed. Although, according to the law, these records should only carry information value at trial,⁶⁸ in practice they play a decisive role before the courts, as discussed below.⁶⁹

Some of the accounts collected described extreme brutality, and in cases where the accused managed to raise the issues before the investigating judge, such allegations were met with marked indifference. The methods reported vary: beatings, whipping, electrocution, deprivation of food, and the so-called “swing,” which consists of suspending victims from a bar placed between two posts, with their arms and legs bound behind their back, before beating them. Junior explained: “They put me on the swing and hung me up for hours. I confessed to everything. I told the court about it, but it wasn’t taken into consideration.” Cédric, sentenced around fifteen years before the time of interview, recalled being beaten with a belt: “I was seriously tortured at the police post. The commander whipped me with his belt every time. I still have the scars. The commander and the investigator told me what to do. They forced me to confess to things I didn’t do...If you don’t say what they want to hear, they whip you hard.” Arnaud described being “beaten...on the soles of his feet with a machete” to extract a confession. Guy said that he was struck on the head with a chair by a gendarme but did not dare report the incident for fear of reprisals. In the context of operations against Boko Haram, several people mentioned food deprivation, in addition to beatings. Without a lawyer present, as one counsel noted, proving torture is extremely difficult.

Torture is used not only to extract confessions, but also to compel people to inform on others. René recounted: “I confessed to everything, and despite that, I was whipped and tied up for several days to force me to denounce my accomplices.” Flavie stated that she was arrested on the basis of confessions obtained under torture: “The security forces tortured [that man] until he confessed that I

68 Article 91, Criminal Procedure Code.

69 See *infra*, Part “Courts that do not hear, defences without a voice”.

organised the killing [of the victim], but it wasn’t true.” Similarly, a lawyer reported that a co-defendant of his client had been forced to denounce his client after being tortured to extract names.

In addition to physical violence, many of those interviewed described other forms of coercion, including threats if they refused to sign statements or being prevented from rereading the records. These practices were used not only where the accused understood the language used by investigators, but also where they did not. Several of those interviewed come from border regions, English-speaking areas, or speak local dialects that differed markedly from the working languages of the security forces. Many were questioned without understanding the questions put to them or the content of the documents they were asked to sign. In terrorism cases, several people arrested in Maroua reported being questioned without being able to understand what was being said. Yusuf noted that an interpreter was present in his case but did not speak his dialect; he was forced to sign statements he did not understand. In some instances, the investigators themselves translated the exchanges and documents. René and Suleiman recounted that an investigator translated the questions, read the statements and then asked them to sign them. Musa stated that the investigators tricked him into signing documents he did not understand: “They asked us to sign so that we could be released. But actually, it was to bring us before the prosecutor...I didn’t report it because even if I spoke up, it wouldn’t change anything.” Many of those interviewed said they had not dared raise these issues before the investigating judge, out of fear or resignation.

Several lawyers emphasised that these practices are part of an investigative approach that is primarily focused on rapidly identifying one or more culprits, rather than on seeking the truth. As one of them put it, “Interviews are conducted solely to build the case against the accused and investigators rarely agree to use expert witnesses to establish the truth.” Another added that “investigators are very proud to appear on television to show that they have arrested criminals who have all confessed”.

► JUDICIAL BLINDNESS

Despite the seriousness of the reported incidents, judicial responses remain very limited. Cédric recounted reporting the violence he suffered to the investigating judge, who allegedly replied that he

should “not count on him”. Those interviewed described a recurring pattern: their statements were met with scepticism, even contempt. Lawyers interviewed emphasised the difficulty of proving acts of torture.

The fact-finding mission interviewed seven judges and prosecutors from military courts on this issue. In Bafoussam, one of them stated that “defendants complain all the time” and that in most cases, “they were forced to admit to acts that they had actually committed”. In Buea, another judge stated that although some individuals make allegations of torture, “it never happens”. In Dschang, an interview with a judge who had been practising for eight years and had tried several death penalty cases was particularly enlightening. When asked whether people sentenced to death complain of ill-treatment during the investigation, the judge replied, “almost always”. When asked how he deals with such allegations, he said that defendants are “so dishonest that it is usually impossible to know who is telling the truth and who is lying”, adding that he had “never rejected a preliminary investigation report on the grounds of ill-treatment”. Given that the vast majority of individuals receive no legal assistance at the investigation stage, that allegations of ill-treatment “never lead to anything” and that judges and prosecutors claim to have no reason to doubt the content of police records, a system emerges in which coercive practices become a central pillar of the evidentiary framework.

▶ IMPOSSIBILITY OF PREPARING A DEFENCE

The period between arrest and court appearance is a critical time for defendants to gather evidence, contact relatives, identify witnesses and develop a defence strategy with legal counsel. In practice, this phase is almost non-existent. Testimonies collected during the investigation show that individuals arrive in court without having had any opportunity to prepare their defence.

For many, pre-trial detention amounts to a complete severing of contact with the outside world, making it impossible to gather exculpatory evidence. Ludovic summarised: “It’s impossible to obtain evidence when you’re in the hands of the criminal investigation police. We were cut off from any means of organising our defence.” Yannick described the powerlessness associated with imprisonment: “Since I was already in detention, I had no means of obtaining evidence. When you come from prison, you don’t have enough resources to

deal with legal proceedings that require financial means.” For some, this impossibility is linked to their social status: “In our country, the poor can’t hope for justice.”

Until the hearings, lawyers are absent in most cases. As discussed below, although the majority of those sentenced to death did have legal representation at trial, most had no contact with their lawyer throughout the entire pre-trial phase, making it impossible to prepare their defence. This is reflected in numerous testimonies: “I was not prepared to obtain evidence because I had no lawyer during the investigations and I didn’t know who else to turn to or how to proceed” (Marvin); “I didn’t have time to prepare or look for evidence because I had no one to listen to me, not even a lawyer; we only saw each other in court” (Rodrigue). Many said that they had never met their lawyer prior to the hearing, or outside of court sessions, and found themselves completely at a loss, unsure where to turn. Between investigation and trial, there is therefore almost no room to prepare a defence.

Defendants arrive at trial in a state of total disempowerment: without witnesses, without evidence, without preparation and sometimes without even having fully understood the charges against them.

COURTS THAT DO NOT HEAR, DEFENCES WITHOUT A VOICE

In Cameroon, military courts play a central role in handing down death sentences. Under the 2014 counter-terrorism law, they have sole jurisdiction over terrorism-related offences, including when the defendants are civilians. This extension of jurisdiction allows civilians – sometimes arrested for minor offences or on the basis of contested confessions, as described above – to be brought before special courts whose guarantees of independence and impartiality are particularly weak.⁷⁰ Half of those sentenced to death interviewed in 2025 had been tried and sentenced by these courts. Yet whether before a military court or a civilian court, those interviewed consistently described limited safeguards and defence rights that exist largely on paper.

LEGAL ASSISTANCE: A PURE FORMALITY

Unlike during the investigation phase, where the presence of a lawyer is extremely rare, 90% of those interviewed were formally assisted before the trial courts.⁷¹ The law requires that counsel be appointed for any defendant facing a capital charge who does not already have one.⁷² However, this appearance of compliance conceals a far more fragile reality.

On the one hand, 8% of those sentenced to death were represented by individuals who were not lawyers. In several cases, the defence was provided by *mandataires de justice* (court-appointed agents who are not members of the Bar), or by *agents d'affaires* (private agents who are not lawyers and have no formal legal training in criminal matters). Yannick stated that he had never had a court-appointed lawyer and that he was defended by a court-appointed agent whom he met only “twice”, and then “a few minutes before the hearing”. René recounted that, “as [he] had no money”, the court-appointed

lawyer stopped coming and court-appointed agents took over: “As far as I know, they weren’t lawyers. I had no choice, so I pleaded guilty.” Guy, who at the time of interview had been sentenced to death for more than twenty years, also stated: “I didn’t know I could get assistance and I was afraid. In the town...there were no law firms. I was assisted by a private agent. We never met. I saw him for the first time at the hearing, on the day I was sentenced.”

Even where families retained private lawyers, some failed to appear in court, prompting courts to turn to unqualified substitutes. Cédric’s case illustrates this: his lawyer repeatedly failed to attend hearings, and he went through the entire trial without representation until the final day, when the judge appointed a court agent who was present in the courtroom. The agent warned that he could not properly represent the defendant: “He told the judge that he couldn’t appoint him on the last day of the trial and expect him to be able to represent me.” Furthermore, a significant proportion of the defence relies on court-appointed lawyers, who are often assigned at a late stage, overburdened, in some cases still trainees at the beginning of their careers,⁷³ and almost always lacking the resources necessary to properly prepare a case. As noted above, most of the individuals interviewed said that their lawyers had never visited them in prison. Junior, for example, stated that his lawyer only agreed to represent him after almost two years of hearings and that she never visited him in detention because she lacked the time and resources. He seriously questioned her effectiveness “because she told the court that the facts were serious and left it to the wisdom of the court”. He was left to draft his appeal submissions himself. Others interviewed described lawyers who were absent, appearing only “when they felt like it,” or only on the day judgment was delivered.

This can be explained by several factors. Marvin attributed his lawyer’s absence to fear, given the sensitive political context: accused in connection with the Anglophone Conflict, he believed that his counsel did not appear for fear of reprisals. More broadly, however, the explanation most frequently given concerns the material conditions in which court-appointed lawyers work. According to them, their remuneration – F.CFA 5,000 per hearing (approximately EUR 7.62) – does not cover their travel, let alone allow them to conduct any meaningful investigation. One explained that, in theory, he would

70 These provisions contravene the Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Fair Trial and Legal Assistance in Africa, which specify that military courts are solely for the purpose of hearing offences of a purely military nature committed by military personnel and that they may not, under any circumstances, have jurisdiction over civilians: Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Fair Trial and Legal Assistance in Africa, 2003, section L.

71 N=45.

72 Article 417, Criminal Procedure Code.

73 The law imposes no minimum experience requirement for lawyers representing individuals facing the death penalty.

need to “make photocopies, research files, visit the client in prison, and locate witnesses”, all of which is impossible on such pay. Another noted that “most of the time, when a lawyer is appointed by the presiding judge to represent a defendant, payment is only made at the end of the proceedings, when the judgment is delivered, or even two weeks later. That’s why some lawyers are not really committed or motivated.”

The absence of defence counsel can open the door to the intervention of other actors. As mentioned above, Cédric, abandoned by his lawyer during his trial, was only assisted on the last day by a court-appointed agent. Meanwhile, the lawyer for the *partie civile* (victim or the victim’s representative seeking damages in the criminal proceedings) not only visited him in prison, but also guided him during the hearings: “He told me what to say at the hearing and signalled to me how to answer questions I didn’t understand very well.” It is unlikely that this assistance was in his best interests.

These practices occur in a context where judges and prosecutors themselves are not always convinced of the importance of the role of the defence lawyer at court hearings. Perceptions vary significantly. One judge emphasised that lawyers are essential and stated that he “always adjourns the hearing to allow them to review the case file and consult with their client.” In contrast, another judge, sitting in a military court, said that it was unnecessary for lawyers to have met with their client in order to plead on their behalf: “Sometimes, when a case has been delayed in court due to a lack of legal representation and the defendant pleads guilty, there is no point in adjourning the case. Lawyers can plead without having discussed the case with their client.” This judge appeared to consider the role of the lawyer as largely a formality, merely a box to be ticked.

Thus, in the majority of cases, legal representation is officially recorded, but it often amounts to a minimal presence in court with no preparation. In reality, it is simply a procedural requirement that is observed but devoid of real significance. The observation that legal representation is largely a formality, already evident during the previous fact-finding mission, therefore persists today.

▶ LANGUAGE BARRIERS

As during the investigation phase, many individuals sentenced to death did not receive adequate interpretation during court proceedings. Of the 20 people who said they needed an interpreter,

only half had access to interpretation at their hearings: a quarter of them said they had no access to an interpreter and a quarter said that the interpreter provided was not competent.⁷⁴ This situation particularly affects Nigerian nationals sentenced to death in the context of the fight against Boko Haram. Kabiru reported that he “never had an interpreter”, either at first instance or at the Court of Appeal: “I don’t know what was written or reported about me. I signed without actually being heard...At the Court of Appeal, the interpreter didn’t understand my dialect and I wasn’t allowed to speak in the proceedings. I didn’t even understand the meaning of the verdict.” Ibrahim, also a Nigerian national, had an interpreter but did not receive any translated documents. Lawyers interviewed confirmed this: “Documents and exhibits are never translated into the relevant language.”

▶ INABILITY TO CONTEST CHARGES

When individuals sentenced to death appear in court, the case file is almost exclusively based on statements – sometimes coerced – obtained during the preliminary investigation. Once in court, they rarely have the means to present witnesses or contest the official version of events. As noted above, investigative materials theoretically have only informational value during hearings. In practice, however, they are often relied upon at face value by the trial courts, without any critical review or opportunity for challenge. Moreover, whether in the English-speaking regions or the Far North Region of Cameroon, terrorism cases are frequently characterised by the absence of victims in the proceedings, including at the hearing: “There were no victims in the proceedings” (Suleiman); “There were no victims, we were just arrested like that” (Haruna).

Final decisions are therefore based almost entirely on the initial statements in the investigation file. This was confirmed by the lawyers interviewed. One lawyer explained that challenges to evidence are “typically dismissed, especially when defendants have signed their own statements”. In other words, when confessions have been obtained under duress, in the absence of an interpreter or without prior review, the mere presence of a signature makes it extremely difficult to contest the content.

74 N=20.

Many of the people interviewed also said that they were never able to present their witnesses. There were numerous accounts of this: “I wasn’t allowed to present my witnesses” (Haibbu); “I told the court that I had witnesses to call, but they were never called to the hearing” (Paul); “I could call witnesses, but they were not heard either during the investigation or at the hearing” (Amin). These accounts are consistent with reports from many lawyers who say they were prevented from cross-examining prosecution witnesses. This was also the case during the trial for the Kumba school massacre, where the entire prosecution case was based on statements of alleged witnesses, none of whom appeared in court to have their statements cross-examined.⁷⁵ This trial has been described as a “sham trial” by human rights organisations.⁷⁶

Similarly, those interviewed described hearings in which neither they nor their lawyers were able to intervene meaningfully. One person sentenced to death for the Kumba school massacre summed up the courtroom atmosphere: “They barely listened to us. Even our lawyers weren’t heard to represent our interests. Whenever they managed to say a few words, they were immediately cut off.” Several others recounted the same refusal to hear the accused or their lawyers. Suleiman, for example, reported: “I wasn’t even given the opportunity to speak in order to defend myself properly.”

These accounts of trials in which the defence was unable to call witnesses or challenge the evidence stand in sharp contrast to official statements. Judicial authorities assert that the evidence is solid, that the accused are heard and that decisions are made with rigour. A military judge stated that the court always has a margin of discretion based on the seriousness of the facts and the dangerousness of the offender, and that the death penalty “is pronounced on the basis of irrefutable evidence of guilt”. Another judge emphasised the attitude of the accused, explaining that the decision also depends on whether they show remorse – which, of course, is not the case if the accused contests the facts.

75 ECPM, RACOPEM, WCADP, 2023, op. cit., §57.

76 Human Rights Watch, “Cameroon: Sham Trial for Kumba School Massacre,” 2021.

▶ HOSTILE BIAS

“The judge himself, through his attitude, anger and discontent, had already convicted us before even trying us.”

Hermann, sentenced to death for terrorism

Many people sentenced to death in English-speaking regions reported a sense that their fate was sealed before they even entered the courtroom. Several accounts described judges whose hostile demeanour gave the impression that guilt was presumed from the outset. Marvin recalled: “The judges in the court were aggressive; I had already been convicted without being tried.” Similarly, Bryan said: “I was already considered an Ambazonian, so they didn’t even want to hear what I had to say.” He added that his trial was widely publicised, including online, contributing to a climate where opinion seemed to have already been formed before the hearing. In other cases, lawyers reported that the defendants’ homosexuality negatively influenced the verdict. Although this was not directly discussed at the hearing, the lawyers interviewed felt that it nevertheless affected the assessment of the case.⁷⁷

▶ MENTAL HEALTH: CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT FROM CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

“People with disabilities are completely left to fend for themselves. They are held in custody and imprisoned without the slightest consideration.”

Lawyer

Cameroonian law provides that a person suffering from “a mental illness which deprives him [or her] of all will-power or of the knowledge that what he [or she] does is blameworthy” is not criminally responsible. Even if the mental incapacity is not total, it constitutes a mitigating factor.⁷⁸ In practice, however, mental health issues are completely absent from proceedings. One lawyer said that people with mental disorders should, in theory, be “referred to specialised centres for treatment”, but added that “those centres

77 In Cameroon, homosexuality is punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment and a fine of FCFA 200,000.

78 Article 78, Penal Code.

don't exist". This lack of attention, evident from the investigation stage, continues throughout the proceedings.

One case in particular stands out: that of Christian Nana, imprisoned in Bangangté.⁷⁹ He was sentenced to death at the age of 23 for killing and then eating his mother. During an interview with the fact-finding mission, he explained: "I was driven to kill my mother by a force from Satan." Not only was his mental state at the time of the act never examined, but it was also disregarded during the proceedings. Family members questioned: "How could he understand what was happening in court? He answered questions, but was he lucid? He was mentally ill, but the court was not interested given the seriousness of the offence."

Individuals with mental disorders are therefore neither assessed nor referred for treatment; they are tried like any other defendant, with the criminal justice system focusing on the acts themselves rather than on the vulnerability of the person arrested.

Similar cases have been reported. In Buea, an individual sentenced to death was reported to be in a comparable situation. However, the fact-finding mission was unable to interview him, as his mental state, according to other people interviewed, made an interview impossible. During the 2018 fact-finding mission, those interviewed emphasised that mental health was a blind spot in criminal proceedings, strikingly illustrated by the case of Héléne Teuba. Although her death sentence was commuted following the 2018 mission,⁸⁰ it is clear that the situation has not changed. There have been no structural reforms to take mental health into account in criminal proceedings.

79 His family gave their consent for his name to be made public, in order to allow advocacy on his behalf.

80 See *infra*, Part "Courts that do not hear, defences without a voice".

DIFFICULT ACCESS TO LEGAL REMEDIES

LEGAL REMEDIES: AVAILABLE BUT HINDERED

The vast majority of people sentenced to death interviewed had pursued legal remedies. At the time of the fact-finding mission, of those interviewed who had been sentenced to death at first instance, 27% of cases were on appeal, and 53% had lodged a petition on a point of law with the Supreme Court; only a minority (18%) had a final decision.⁸¹ These figures show that avenues for legal remedy exist, are used, and constitute important fora for challenge.

However, testimonies reveal that access to these remedies is unequal and often obstructed, dependent on technical procedures – filing a brief, making a deposit, meeting deadlines – that individuals sentenced to death are rarely able to accomplish on their own. The most immediate obstacle is the timeframe: the sentenced person has only ten days from the day after the judgment to file an appeal, and must then submit to the registrar a statement setting out their arguments and conclusions, together with any supporting documents, within a maximum of 15 days of filing the notice of appeal. Some of those sentenced to death were never informed of their right to appeal by the court or their lawyer. Some said that they did not know that an appeal was possible. Kabiru stated: "It was only on the last day of the appeal period that I found out I could appeal, and then it was other prisoners who told me." While he managed to file his appeal at the last moment, others were unable to do so. Karami said: "Because I don't know the law, I didn't know I could appeal." Ibrahim, who was in hospital on the day of the judgment, stated: "When the decision was handed down, I was lying in hospital; no one informed me of my right to appeal. It was only a year later that I found out I had been sentenced to death." At the time of interview, the final decisions in both their cases had been confirmed about ten years earlier. The case of Christian, mentioned above, who has mental health issues, also illustrates this pattern. His family tried to help him, but too late: "It was useless: his appeal was declared inadmissible."

81 N=45. Additionally, one individual (representing 2% of the total) had initiated opposition proceedings.

In addition to the issue of time limits, the complexity of the procedure poses a further barrier. No legal aid is provided to help people sentenced to death lodge an appeal.⁸² court-appointed lawyers cease their involvement as soon as the sentence is handed down, leaving the defendants entirely on their own to navigate the highly technical procedures.

These difficulties are compounded by cost. Several of those interviewed explained that, in practice, pursuing an appeal depends on paying sums that are considerable for someone in detention. As the law does not set a specific amount, the deposit is determined at the discretion of the presiding judge of the sentencing court. Yannick and Fabrice reported that their lawyer requested a deposit of FCFA 35,000 (EUR 53.40) to continue proceedings. Shamsu said that he was required to pay FCFA 60,000 (EUR 91.50) for the appeal. As Arnaud summarised: “Where are prisoners, often abandoned, supposed to find this money?” While Suleiman received support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees due to his refugee status, most people sentenced to death have to mobilise resources that do not exist. In some prisons, even the simple act of transmitting the appeal to the court is monetised by prison staff.

For Franck, access to remedies was blocked at first instance. His family described repeated administrative obstacles that prevented any appeal from being lodged: “The justice system did not give him the right or the opportunity to appeal. Even we, when we tried to do so, were prevented. He wrote several requests for clemency that were never sent.” These multiple obstacles lend credibility to allegations of deliberate obstruction of his case, as detailed in the box below.

THE CASE OF FRANCK EBOUTOU MINLA'A: SENTENCED TO DEATH WITHOUT LEGAL REPRESENTATION, WITHOUT EVIDENCE, WITHOUT RECOURSE – A CLOSED CASE?

Franck Eboutou Minla'a is the only person sentenced to death interviewed who never received any legal assistance during the proceedings.⁸³ At the time of interview, he had been sentenced to death for 18 years for the rape and fatal assault of Marthe Ekemeyong Moumié, a Cameroonian anti-colonial activist and widow of Cameroonian politician Félix-Roland Moumié. Throughout his trial, Franck received no legal assistance: “I had no legal advice, no lawyer. I defended myself...I was completely alone facing the serious charges that still hang over me to this day.” He further stated: “In fact, I never had a trial, something I continue to demand today.” During the interview, he said that key pieces of evidence were never presented in court, including DNA tests carried out at the request of his family that could have exonerated him. His access to legal remedies was completely blocked. He denounced the trial as political and continues to call for a proper trial. His family believes that he was made a scapegoat in what they consider to be a state crime.

When access to legal remedies is possible, they often result in acquittals. In 2020, the Maroua Court of Appeal acquitted three women sentenced to death for terrorism-related offences, who had been interviewed by the 2018 fact-finding mission. They were acquitted after nearly six years in detention, thanks to the support of the Cameroonian abolitionist movement, which highlighted the generic nature of the charges, the absence of identified victims and the lack of material evidence in the first instance proceedings.

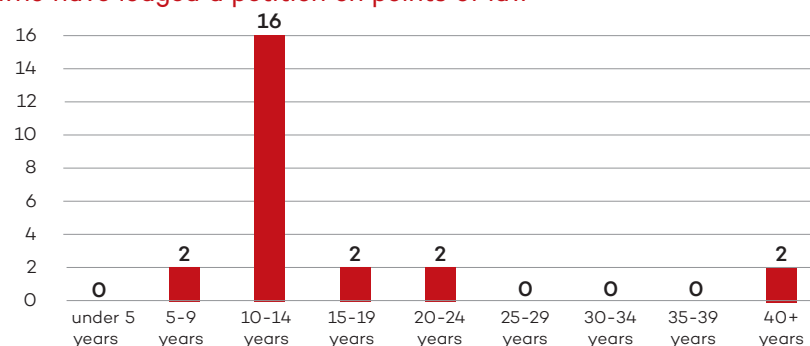
▶ SUPREME COURT DELAYS: A SOURCE OF TERROR FOR THOSE PEOPLE SENTENCED TO DEATH

The potential effectiveness of appeals does not extend to proceedings before the Supreme Court. Cases that reach this stage sometimes remain stalled for decades. At the time of interview, of the 24 individuals awaiting the result of a petition on points of law, 22 had been sentenced to death for more than ten years, including two for more than forty years, as illustrated in Figure 5.

82 Although there is a law providing for legal aid as of right for persons sentenced to death, it applies only to petitions to the Supreme Court and not to appeals before the courts of appeal.

83 His name is mentioned with the consent of his family, in order to enable targeted advocacy on his behalf.

Figure 5: Length of detention of interviewees who have lodged a petition on points of law



One of them, André, said that he had filed his petition in 1987 but had never been informed of any developments: “I wonder if I should withdraw my petition...I have no one to follow up on my case.” All evidence suggests that his case file has been lost. This situation is not isolated: in addition to the people interviewed during the fact-finding mission, civil society actors also identified Philippe, sentenced to death in the 1980s for aggravated theft and currently incarcerated in Dschang. Since filing his petition in April 1987, he has never received any information about the status or outcome of the proceedings.⁸⁴

These delays sometimes lead to withdrawals, as in the case of another person sentenced to death, whose case has been monitored by civil society for several years. This man withdrew his petition in 2005. Having received no information from the Supreme Court since then, he still does not know whether the withdrawal was accepted. He remains in a state of agonising uncertainty, not knowing whether or not he is eligible for a presidential pardon.⁸⁵

The consequences can be dramatic, particularly given the detention conditions in Cameroonian prisons.⁸⁶ This was the case for Pierre Saah, whose situation was documented during the previous fact-finding mission: after more than 35 years in detention awaiting the outcome of his petition, he died in 2020.

Individuals sentenced to death live in conditions of extreme anxiety and worry, linked to prolonged uncertainty that can last for decades.

⁸⁴ For further details on these two cases, see supra, Part “Trends in death sentences in Cameroon”.

⁸⁵ On presidential pardons, see following section.

⁸⁶ See Part “Detention Conditions of People Sentenced to Death in Cameroon”.

These documented cases are undoubtedly only the tip of the iceberg: what about those whom civil society actors have been unable to identify? How many are still living in similar situations of uncertainty, sometimes for decades?

Pierre Saah’s inexorable wait

2018	2025
Pierre Saah was sentenced to death in 1984. He remained sentenced to death for more than 35 years. His petition on points of law never received a response. All the evidence indicates that his case file was lost. At the age of 78, he was still awaiting a decision. The fact-finding mission recommended that his petition be examined without delay or, if his case file could not be found, that he be granted a pardon.	Pierre Saah died in detention in 2020, at the age of 80. He never received a response to his petition.

► CLEMENCY: AN OPAQUE PROCESS

The unsuccessful outcome of legal remedies does not necessarily mark the end of possible recourse. In addition to the exceptional review procedure,⁸⁷ individuals sentenced to death can, in theory, request a presidential pardon. However, this is only available to those whose judgment has become final. The fact-finding mission revealed that although this procedure exists, it remains deeply opaque to most of those interviewed. Many said they had no understanding of what a pardon entailed or the steps required: “I don’t know anything about it. No one informs us of our rights. I can’t read or write, so I have no idea.” In many cases, it is fellow prisoners who inform each other of the existence of this possibility. Yet most are unaware of the eligibility criteria. This lack of knowledge leads to inappropriate steps being taken: many of those interviewed had written requests for pardons while their legal proceedings were still pending. Cédric,

⁸⁷ It is possible to request a review of criminal proceedings when new facts or evidence come to light establishing the innocence of a convicted person (Article 535, Criminal Procedure Code). In theory, this remedy is available to individuals sentenced to death, but none of those interviewed had pursued it.

for example, said he filed “two requests for clemency while [his] case was still on appeal”. Lambert continued to submit requests while his petition on point of law was pending. Guy lamented never having received a response to his request for pardon, filed four years earlier, although his case remains pending before the courts.⁸⁸

Although, in principle, it is impossible to receive a pardon while legal remedies are pending, specific cases were observed in the context of the implementation of the presidential decree of 15 April 2020. Adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce prison overcrowding, the decree announced the commutation of death sentences to life imprisonment.⁸⁹ According to information gathered during the fact-finding mission, several people sentenced to death benefited from this measure – including Héléne Teuba, an individual with mental health issues, whose situation was documented by the 2018 mission. In one of the prisons visited, at least eight people interviewed had benefited from the measure. Surprisingly, two of them reportedly had their sentences commuted while their cases were still pending before the higher courts, in apparent contradiction with the decree, which states that it applies “only to persons who have received a final decision at the date of this decree”.⁹⁰ These cases raise further questions, as none of the beneficiaries received any official documentation confirming the commutation. According to their testimonies, the information was conveyed orally by prison authorities, who declined to answer the questions of the fact-finding delegation.

This opacity fuels allegations of unlawful practices within detention facilities. Henri recounted: “I see prisoners being granted pardons without understanding why. It’s a business run by the prison governor... there’s a lot of shady activity going on.” René added: “I know that everything can be bought. If you have the means, then you can negotiate with the governor.” Several civil society actors shared these suspicions. One stated: “Only the governor knows how many people have benefited, and he doesn’t make that information public.” He added: “It’s very difficult to talk about transparency...We don’t always understand the criteria required to benefit, and even those

88 Guy initiated opposition proceedings, allowing a person who was tried in absentia (i.e. who did not appear in court) to have the decision overturned and the case retried. Article 427 of the Criminal Procedure Code sets out the conditions for this procedure.

89 As well as other sentence reductions for other convictions. See Decree of 15 April 2020, Annex 4.

90 Article 1, Decree of 15 April 2020.

who do benefit attribute it to divine grace or the prison governor’s mercy.” In another town, the pardon procedure was described as “a lottery”, dependent more on “financial means and connections with the administration” than on objective criteria.

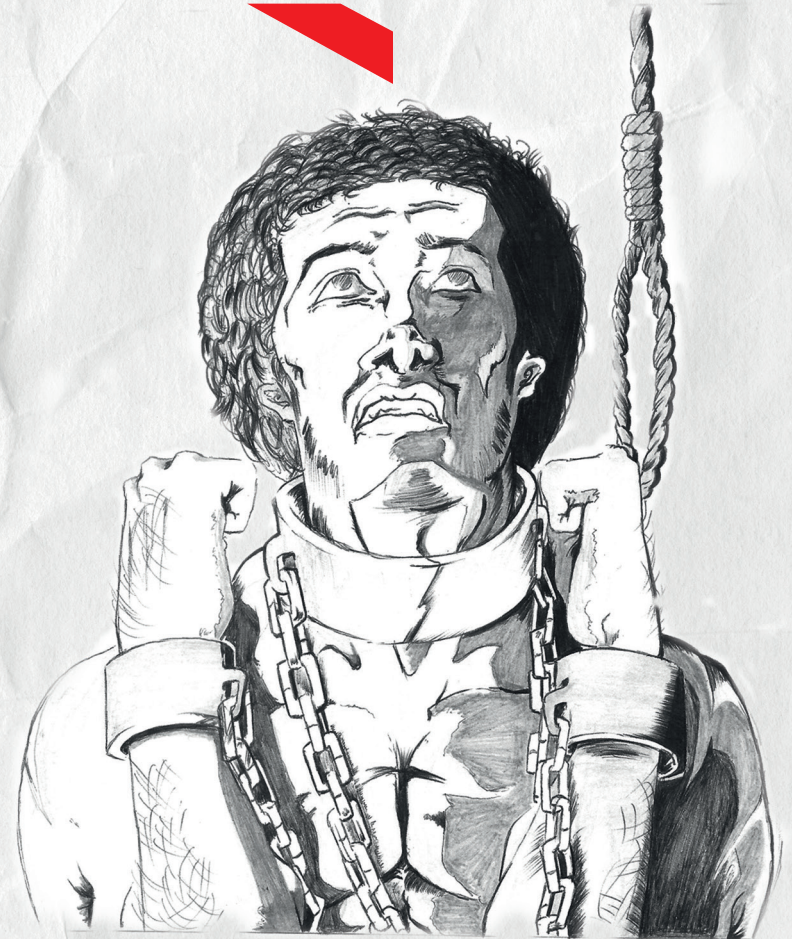
Beyond these opaque practices within prisons, it is important to note that the terms of the decree itself were highly restrictive. Article 4 excluded many categories of prisoners, in particular those prosecuted under the 2014 counter-terrorism law. However, as mentioned above, individuals sentenced to death for terrorism-related offences represent a very significant proportion of those sentenced to death. In practice, this means that most were not eligible for presidential pardon under the decree.⁹¹

Héléne Teuba’s commutation of sentence

2018-2019	2025
Héléne Teuba was sentenced to death in 2004 for the death of two of her children. She suffered from mental health issues, but no medical assessment was carried out. While in detention, where she received no psychiatric care, her condition deteriorated further. The fact-finding mission recommended that she be granted a pardon so that she could receive appropriate medical care for her condition.	Héléne Teuba was granted a pardon under the 2020 presidential decree. Her death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. According to the information received by the fact-finding mission, the prison administration had considered having her admitted to a specialised health centre, on condition that her family pay for her healthcare. However, her family indicated that, unfortunately, they did not have the financial means to do so.

91 On this point: ACAT-Cameroon and FIACAT, “Decongestion of Cameroonian Prisons: A presidential decree too restrictive,” 23 April 2020.

DETENTION CONDITIONS OF PEOPLE SENTENCED TO DEATH IN CAMEROON



There are no prisons specifically designated for individuals sentenced to death. Although the Cameroonian authorities provide no official data on where such people are held, civil society estimates they are scattered across approximately 50⁹² of the country's 76 prison facilities. During visits to ten prisons in both French- and English-speaking areas, the fact-finding mission was able to confirm the presence of people sentenced to death in eight of them. The lack of precise data also makes it impossible to determine their numbers in each facility. In some prisons, the prison authorities declined to provide even an estimate.

92 ECPM, RACOPEM, WCADP, 2023, op. cit., §39.

LIVING WITH THE DEATH PENALTY IN PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS AMONG OTHER PRISONERS

“Life is really difficult and makes you want to give up living.”

Bryan, detained in Buea prison

The facilities visited varied greatly but shared one common feature: their ageing infrastructure, often inherited from the colonial period or built shortly after independence. For example, New Bell Prison in Douala, where people sentenced to death are incarcerated, was opened in 1902, Dschang prison dates from 1927, Bangangté prison from 1935, and Buea prison from 1936. Yaoundé prison, slightly more recent, was built in 1968. People sentenced to death are thus detained in outdated buildings, often unsuited to the current prison population.

DETENTION WITH LITTLE REGARD FOR LEGAL STATUS

Across the prisons visited, there is no separation between those who have been convicted and sentenced and those on remand. Depending on the facility, people sentenced to death may be detained together or dispersed among other prisoners, with no apparent uniform prison policy guiding these arrangements. Outside Douala and Yaoundé, they share cells with the general prison population, often in communal spaces characterised by high levels of overcrowding. People sentenced to death can spend years, sometimes decades, there, with the constant anxiety of a resumption of executions.

The situations observed in the various prisons visited revealed alarming levels of overcrowding. In Yoko, for example, prison authorities reported that there were between 3,000 and 3,500 individuals detained, despite an official capacity of around 2,500. This extreme overcrowding worsens detention conditions for the entire prison population, including those sentenced to death. In September 2025, four deaths were recorded in this prison, which prison authorities attributed directly to the population increase. In Buea, several individuals sentenced to death reported cells holding 250 to 270 people in 40 to 50 m², so that “prisoners sleep on the floor” because there is no space to lie down. In Bangangté, 25 to 30 people share a 16 m² cell. In Bafoussam, cell sizes vary, but overcrowding remains extreme: one person sentenced to death

reported that 10 prisoners share 4 m², another that 15 prisoners share 20 m².⁹³ In Maroua, shared cells hold 10 to 70 people. Ado described a cell “like a sardine tin”, where around 40 men sleep in 15 m². In Dschang, Lambert used the same expression to describe his own cell, shared with 65 other people. This overcrowding deprives prisoners of any personal space, makes it difficult to move around at night and increases daily tensions. Several interviewees also reported cells plunged into darkness at night; one noted, without providing details, that “bad things happen when there is no light”. These conditions are part of a national context of severe prison overcrowding. In 2018, according to official data, 31,815 people were detained for 17,917 places, a national occupancy rate of 178%. In 2020, the number of prisoners temporarily declined, partly due to sentence reductions granted under the 2020 decree,⁹⁴ as well as an increase in official capacity to 19,455. These factors lowered the occupancy rate to 138%. However, the improvement was short-lived: by 2021, according to the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC), numbers had risen again to 27,947,⁹⁵ and by December 2024 they had increased to 37,150, for 20,955 places, representing an occupancy rate of 177%.⁹⁶

Some facilities, such as in Douala and Yaoundé, do have wings reserved for people sentenced to death. These wings avoid the extreme overcrowding of some shared cells, but they do not offer satisfactory conditions. In Yaoundé, each person sentenced to death has a cell measuring approximately 3 m², which those concerned generally considered preferable. In Douala, Fabrice described a 15 m² cell for three people, with no running water and infested with mosquitoes.

⁹³ Some larger cells can hold up to 90 people.

⁹⁴ According to official data, 10,181 detainees out of a total of 27,500 benefited from this measure. However, this figure raises questions, considering that, in theory, only those who had received a final judgment were eligible, and the percentage of people in detention awaiting judgment was 62% in 2020: Cameroon, *Sixth periodic report submitted by Cameroon under Article 19 of the Convention [against Torture] pursuant to the simplified reporting procedure, due in 2021*, CAT/C/CMR/6, 2022, Annex 1: Prison statistics.

⁹⁵ Ministry of Justice, *Report on Human Rights in Cameroon in 2022, 2023*, p. 227.

⁹⁶ A. Djaleu, “Présidentielle 2025 : l’univers carcéral camerounais absent du débat politique” (2025 Presidential Election: Cameroon’s prison system absent from political debate), *Actu Cameroun*, 10 October 2025.

▶ BETWEEN DEPRIVATION AND PRIVILEGE: A TWO-TIER DETENTION SYSTEM

“Here, if you have no money, you’re not entitled to anything.”

Kelvin, sentenced to death in Buea

Regardless of the facility, material deprivation is systemic. According to Flavie, “there’s nothing [in the cells]”. Those interviewed described cells without ventilation or blankets, where conditions alternate between bitter cold and suffocating heat. In Bangangté, several detainees spoke of freezing nights, made worse by the lack of bedding: many of those interviewed slept on cardboard or directly on the floor. In Buea, Brice said that, despite the overcrowded cells, detainees “are exposed to the cold” because they have no blankets. By contrast, in hotter areas such as Maroua, those interviewed reported oppressive heat. Ado explained that “there’s no air passing through and it’s extremely hot”, while Haruna said he had to sleep almost without clothing because the temperature was so high.

There are no toilets inside most cells. During the night, prisoners use buckets that they must empty every morning when the doors are opened. The external toilets are often in poor condition. In Buea, Rodrigue describes facilities that are “dilapidated, with foul smells”, which prisoners must “empty themselves when they are full”. Access to water is also problematic: at Maroua prison, “there are taps, but no water flows”. The prison administration allocates four litres of water per person per day, which is supposed to cover both drinking and basic hygiene needs. Any additional amount must be purchased. While some prisons, such as Douala and Yaoundé, have separate wings for people sentenced to death, the real dividing line in detention conditions is neither the sentence nor the grounds for conviction: it is based on financial resources. Prisons operate according to a market logic, where access to decent living conditions largely depends on the ability to pay or receive support from outside. While bedding is non-existent in most facilities, prisoners must buy a mattress or receive one from their family, otherwise they sleep on the floor. Interviewed at Yoko prison, Josué said: “Those who have no money sleep on their clothes.”

Basic necessities – soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, clothing – are never provided. According to Souleiman: “They don’t give us anything.” Access to these items depends entirely on family support, donations from NGOs or internal solidarity. For those without families, such

as Henri, a 65-year-old man, the situation is even more precarious: “If you have no money, it’s over for you. And for an old man like me, it’s very difficult, because my family no longer visits me.”

The same applies to food. In most prisons, detainees receive only one meal a day, consisting mainly of corn, beans, millet or couscous, which is considered monotonous, low in nutritional value and often impossible to eat without supplements. The prisons in Douala, Yaoundé and Buea have the particularity of allowing people sentenced to death, unlike other detainees, to receive a small amount of food to manage and prepare their own meals. Even so, according to Hermann, detained in Buea: “The food is very low in vitamins and disgusting” and survival requires supplementing it with personal contributions. Similarly, in Dschang, Cédric said “[I eat] couscous from Monday to Saturday and rice on Sundays. The quantity is minimal, and the quality is poor. The sauce is just water. You can’t rely on prison rations to survive.”

Food is therefore a key issue. The budget allocated to prison meals increased steadily between 2016 and 2021, with funding rising from F.CFA 2.57 billion to F.CFA 5.265 billion [EUR 3.92 to EUR 8.03 million], allowing the daily ration per detainee to increase from F.CFA 290 to 531 [EUR 0.44 to EUR 0.81] in 2021. However, this improvement was quickly offset by the continued rise in the prison population.⁹⁷ By 2022, the daily individual ration had fallen back to F.CFA 431 [EUR 0.66].⁹⁸

While Cameroon reports that the prison food budget reached F.CFA 5.465 billion [EUR 8.33 million] in 2025,⁹⁹ it is highly likely that daily rations have decreased again given the sharp increase in the prison population over the same period. This situation affects those without family support even more severely, particularly foreign nationals in detention, who receive no additional support from outside.

Inequality between individuals detained without resources and others in detention is institutionalised. In several prisons, prison staff acknowledge the existence of cells reserved for wealthier individuals, known as “VIPs”. In Buea, one of the thirteen cells is reserved for “military personnel and rich people”, in exchange

for a monthly payment. A small number of people sentenced to death have access to such cells, including Alain, who is detained in Dschang. Unlike the majority of prisoners, he shares a cell with only eight other people and describes conditions that are far better than those elsewhere in the prison: “It’s a VIP cell. My cell is clean. Everyone has their own bed, the toilets are clean, we have access to water and fresh air, and there are no lighting problems, except during general power cuts. I have my own toiletries. I also have my own clothes, which I change regularly and have washed outside the prison by my family.” Financial resources thus make it possible to radically transform detention conditions.

97 A. Djaleu, “Présidentielle 2025 : l’univers carcéral camerounais absent du débat politique”, *Actu Cameroun*, 10 October 2025.

98 Ministry of Justice, Report on Human Rights in Cameroon in 2022, 2023, p. 234.

99 Cameroon, Cameroon’s mid-term report for the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, November 2025, Response to Recommendation 67.

A DISCIPLINARY SYSTEM BASED ON VIOLENCE AND HUMILIATION

Although disciplinary practices differ from one facility to another, the testimonies gathered reveal a system in which violent punishments remain deeply entrenched. Overall, the individuals sentenced to death interviewed did not report daily physical violence other than disciplinary punishments. It should nevertheless be noted that prison staff were sometimes present during the interviews, which may have influenced, albeit indirectly, the information shared. In addition, allegations of sexual harassment – a term not always clearly defined by those interviewed – were reported in Bangangté, while allegations of physical violence were raised in Yaoundé. Moreover, prison authorities continue to resort to sometimes very severe punishments in the context of disciplinary enforcement. Subject to the same regime as the rest of the prison population, those sentenced to death are exposed to these practices in the same way: it is therefore not treatment linked to their status, but rather treatment “like everyone else”.

A salient feature is that discipline is not enforced exclusively by prison officers. Several testimonies described a control system based on the delegation of certain responsibilities to certain prisoners. In Douala, prison officials described a system of “cell leaders”, appointed by guards to provide continuous surveillance on their behalf and act as “relays of the administration”. These prisoners are, for example, responsible for explaining the internal rules to new arrivals, as these rules are not displayed publicly. In Bafoussam and Bangangté, people sentenced to death also mentioned the presence of “informant prisoners in the pay of the administration”, who may “blackmail” or “betray the others”. Their discreet but constant role allows for continuous observation of daily prison life and facilitates the identification of conduct deemed non-compliant, often leading to a proliferation of sanctions.

Several types of disciplinary sanctions were identified, depending on the seriousness of the alleged misconduct. Cell transfer is the first level of disciplinary action and was reported in particular at Maroua prison. It involves transferring a detainee to a more dilapidated or crowded cell, making the detention environment itself an additional punishment.

Disciplinary isolation was reported in the majority of prisons visited. In Douala, Yannick said that “those who breach the rules spend

the whole day in the disciplinary cell,” adding that the heat there is “unbearable.” In Buea, Brice described a cell that is “extremely cramped and dirty, with foul smells”. According to the information gathered, this cell measures approximately 0.5 m².

In addition to these sanctions, corporal punishment remains widely practised. People sentenced to death detained in Douala, Bafoussam, Bangangté, Maroua and Yoko reported beatings with whips or machetes, occasionally carried out in public, and at times accompanied by deprivation of food or visits.

The use of chains remains a common punishment, according to testimonies gathered in Bafoussam, Bangangté, Buea, Dschang, Yaoundé and Yoko. In Buea, several people sentenced to death reported having seen prisoners shackled in the courtyard, “in the centre, exposed to the cold and the elements”. In Yaoundé, a man sentenced to death described having been shackled for several days for drug trafficking. In Yoko, a detainee described shackling as a “normal” sanction, applied after a fight. In several facilities, people sentenced to death recounted being tied to a post or shackled inside punishment cells for several days.

These shackling practices are rooted in a specific legal framework. Decree No. 92/052 of 27 March 1992, which is still in force, explicitly authorises “shackling in a punishment cell or any other place for a period of fifteen days” as a disciplinary measure. This provision directly contradicts the Mandela Rules, the principal international standard governing the treatment of prisoners.¹⁰⁰ Rule 47 prohibits the use of instruments of restraint, such as handcuffs, chains, irons and straitjackets, as punishment. The Cameroonian authorities state that discussions are underway to prohibit the use of chains as a disciplinary measure and that awareness-raising activities are being carried out among staff on the prevention of violence in prison.¹⁰¹ However, experiences are not uniform. In Maroua, some said they had never been punished and considered that sanctions are only applied in cases of “recalcitrance”, while others said that “the guards often mistreat us for no reason”. In Yaoundé, one of the people interviewed said that those sentenced to death receive more respectful treatment, which he attributed to their calm behaviour

¹⁰⁰ United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), UN General Assembly, Resolution 70/175, 17 December 2015.

¹⁰¹ Cameroon, Sixth periodic report submitted by Cameroon under Article 19 of the Convention [against Torture] pursuant to the simplified reporting procedure, due in 2021, CAT/C/CMR/6, 21 March 2022, §111.

or to the prison officers' perception of them: "The prison officers respect us more than the others." However, this perception is not shared by all: another person reported having been "beaten up" and even "tortured".

Shackling, a continuing practice

2018-2019	2025
The fact-finding mission denounced disciplinary practices that breach international standards, particularly shackling.	Detained persons reported that shackling continues to be used as a punitive measure. However, the authorities state that they are considering prohibiting these practices.

PASSING THE TIME: UNEQUAL ACCESS TO ACTIVITIES

Activities play a central role in the daily lives of people sentenced to death. However, their nature and accessibility vary greatly depending on the prison, the resources available and detainees' social position within the prison hierarchy.

Across all facilities, cells are opened in the morning – sometimes as early as 6 a.m. in Yaoundé, or 9 a.m. in Buea – and closed in the late afternoon, usually between 5 p.m. and 7.30 p.m. In Buea, however, several interviewees noted that the time spent outside the cell can be reduced when "people cause trouble"; in such cases, time outside the cell is limited to between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. From the time cells are opened until they are closed again, people sentenced to death, like the rest of the prison population, move around, try to earn some money or simply look for ways to pass the time.

In several facilities, time spent outside the cell provides an opportunity to generate income. In Maroua, Suleiman, Salihu and Mousa described making knitted caps, running small trading activities, or even operating a small "cafeteria". However, it is not compulsory to stay outside: in Dschang, Alain said he preferred to spend most of the day in his cell, where he runs a small business, while others, such as Cédric, described keeping themselves busy with weaving or small-scale catering. According to Cédric, "Everyone tries to find ways of keeping busy".

Activities are primarily a means of staving off boredom. In Bangangté, René summarised: "We play cards, we eat, we entertain ourselves." In Buea, as soon as the cell doors open, "We walk around, we play games, others work" (Rodrigue). In Bafoussam, people sentenced to death mentioned sports, reading, or training workshops. Opportunities nevertheless vary greatly from one prison to another, and sometimes even within the same facility. In Yaoundé, several people sentenced to death cited a wide range of sports and recreational activities, including football, handball, billiards, table tennis and television. Many stressed their importance. Bertrand said: "The only thing that makes me forget my worries is recreation and sport...otherwise I would be very unhappy." However, others, such as Didier, said that there were no activities available in this prison beyond the possibility of moving around. This disparity reflects the economic inequalities between prisoners. As one interviewee noted, only "the wealthiest have access

to leisure activities that are inaccessible to most of the others". Paul went further, describing how, within the same prison, only the wealthiest prisoners have access to conjugal visits.

In more isolated facilities, such as Yoko, the situation is very different. As the prison governor himself acknowledged, "There are no organised activities." Prisoners therefore organise their own days: "We stay outside all day."

For some, the lack of activity is not directly linked to how prison activities are organised. Flavie noted that some women participate in training activities because "here, you have to do everything you can to pass the time". However, she herself reported spending her days in her cell and not leaving it. Accused of having made false accusations, she said she feared for her safety: "I don't go out to avoid being killed out of jealousy." She has been in detention for 20 years. Faruk said he no longer participated in activities due to persistent and untreated eye pain. At the time of interview, he had been sentenced to death for six years and reported spending his days waiting for his case to be reviewed by the Supreme Court. In most facilities, healthcare is extremely limited and prisoners often have no choice but to wait, sometimes for years, without proper treatment.

CHRONIC INSUFFICIENCY OF HEALTHCARE

SCARCE CARE IN ENVIRONMENTS CONDUCTIVE TO DISEASE

"If you don't have financial support, you die."

Prosper, sentenced to death for 18 years

In all the prisons visited, physical health emerged as a major concern. Access to healthcare is extremely limited, primarily due to a shortage of medicines. In Maroua, Nasiru said that prisoners are only given sedatives. In Douala, those interviewed said that when a prisoner falls ill, they are taken to the infirmary, but "there are no medicines. We just pray not to get sick here". In Buea, Rodrigue noted that the medical response is "barely paracetamol", and even then, "you pay for it". The Cameroonian government reported a decrease in the budget allocated to healthcare in detention – from FCFA 1.150 billion in 2023 to FCFA 1.100 billion in 2025¹⁰² [EUR 1.75 million to EUR 1.68 million] – even though the prison population has increased significantly, further reducing the resources available per person.

Furthermore, there is no follow-up for chronic illnesses. In Dschang, the family of a man sentenced to death reported that they had informed the authorities of his diabetes, "but he hasn't received any medical care". The only concession made by the prison was to allow him to prepare his own food. In this facility, prisoners are largely dependent on nuns from a religious mission, who bring them medication. The prison authorities acknowledge that although care is provided "without discrimination", technical capacity to provide healthcare "is inadequate".

These widespread deficiencies are a source of deep concern for people sentenced to death. In Bafoussam, Henri stated that, without resources, "I will die here"; Junior confirmed: "Without money, we're doomed." Transfers to hospital are not covered by the prison administration and must be paid for personally or by family members. René, imprisoned in Bangangté, noted that, in serious cases, "it's

¹⁰² Cameroon, Cameroon's mid-term report for the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, November 2025, Response to Recommendation 67.

certain death if family don't take us to hospital". In Buea, Yoko and Maroua, several people sentenced to death reported the same reality: without money, medical care simply does not exist.

Prison officers acknowledged these difficulties. In Douala, a senior prison officer explained that some medical examinations have to be paid for and that "many cannot afford them. They have to pay out of their own pockets. Their families help them. But it's impossible if they have no money." In Buea, his counterpart noted that the prison's only pharmacy is "poorly stocked with medicines" and that prisoners have to buy everything themselves: "Prisoners have no access to preventive care, no medical examinations, nothing at all. As a prisoner, if you have money, you can request care." Sometimes even this option is blocked by the administration: Shamsu, imprisoned in Maroua, reported that when his family brings him medicines, the prison officers sometimes refuse to allow them in.

Overcrowding, living in close quarters and poor hygiene make Cameroonian prisons highly conducive to the spread of disease. In Bangangté, the administration mentioned tuberculosis, dysentery, cholera and scabies, diseases that spread rapidly in these conditions. In Maroua, Salihu said that he had developed diabetes, which was untreated.

Under these conditions, people sentenced to death fall ill, wait, and weaken, like other prisoners, but they are particularly vulnerable due to the extremely long durations of their detention. This prolonged incarceration makes access to healthcare more difficult, exacerbates untreated illnesses, and increases the risk of complications. In Maroua, several deaths have been reported: Haruna said that of the three co-defendants imprisoned with him about ten years earlier, two died in prison. Nasiru also mentioned the case of a man sentenced to death who died due to a lack of appropriate care.

▶ PERVASIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS WITHOUT CARE

"I have no life. I'm almost dead."

Pierre, detained in Yaoundé

Across all facilities, people sentenced to death describe a total lack of mental health care. Yannick summarised: "We barely receive primary care, so who's going to give us psychiatric care?" The fact-finding mission identified at least three people sentenced to death

who appeared to be suffering from serious psychiatric disorders: one person in Buea, one in Bangangté and one in Yaoundé. The mission was unable to meet either of the individuals held in Buea and Yaoundé. In Yaoundé, a prison official confirmed that there was a person sentenced to death with psychiatric disorders in the prison, but said that the facility "cannot provide care because it lacks the financial and technical means to do so". In Bangangté, Christian is sentenced to death for killing his mother on what he described as orders from Satan. The prison authorities acknowledged that he does not receive any care. When asked about the presence of detainees with mental health issues, they replied: "There are some. But [there is] no specific care, because there's no medical documentation to certify it."

More generally, beyond these cases, the majority of those sentenced to death interviewed described deeply deteriorated mental health. Pierre stated, "We're all a bit mentally ill." People sentenced to death described their daily suffering, a life eroded by fear and loss of hope, and expressed deep sadness and loneliness. In Buea, Bangangté and Maroua, several spoke openly of a "desire to die" or "suicidal thoughts".

Many said they were losing their minds: Bryan referred to "mental disorders" caused by the wait, which he described as "delusions"; Amin said that prison "haunts me to the point of losing my mind". Yakubu conveyed his despair: "We don't even have the hope of ever getting out"; Musa spoke of "episodes" triggered by negative thoughts. Several of those interviewed said that they are sometimes unable to eat or sleep. Didier said he was "desperate, on the verge of madness. I don't deserve what's happening to me".

Coping strategies are often characterised by withdrawal and isolation. Many retreat into themselves. Haruna said that his suffering leads him to avoid all contact: "Often, I don't want anyone to speak to me." Bertrand said he felt "abandoned, ostracised", to the point of preferring to "avoid mixing with others".

Many described the feeling that time has stopped, the impression of living outside the world, with no possible future. In Bafoussam, Ludovic said: "It's really as if we've stopped living." In Dschang, Lambert recounted his moral collapse, after several decades of imprisonment: "I'm constantly ill, my morale is very low. I'm alone here and without family. I think I'm going to die in prison without ever marrying or having children." Hervé, in Yaoundé, said that "the spectre of death is constantly hanging over" him. Junior spoke of

the extinction of the self: “We’re no longer men.”

These symptoms resemble what the literature describes as “death row syndrome”, a state of psychological exhaustion linked to the interminable wait for execution, radical uncertainty and the absence of any prospect of resolution. Documented in several countries as one of the structural consequences of capital punishment, this constant tension profoundly weakens those affected and leads to a gradual deterioration of mental health: sleep disorders, anxiety attacks, feelings of abandonment, loss of bearings, and suicidal thoughts.

A prison healthcare system that remains non-existent

2018-2019	2025
Access to healthcare was extremely limited; there was no psychiatric or psychological support. Those interviewed depended on their families and NGOs for medicines and hygiene products.	The prison healthcare system remained virtually non-existent: there was a lack of medication, and prisoners were dependent on their families or NGOs for treatment and transfers. There was no mental health care provision.

ANXIOUS AND STIGMATISED FAMILIES

The detention of a person sentenced to death affects not only the individual incarcerated, it deeply destabilises those around them. Legal uncertainty and the possibility of execution create a climate of distress. In Yaoundé, one family said they lived “in constant anguish over the possibility of his execution”, whilst another described themselves as “terrified and extremely anxious”. Elsewhere, relatives spoke of daily sadness. One family interviewed said: “Everyone is always crying.”

These concerns are compounded by often severe social stigmatisation. In Yoko, one family said that, in their community, “everyone rejects us, insults us, discriminates against us”. Another said they were “traumatised in every way” and reported enduring “hostile stares from others, rejection by the community, stigmatisation and insults”. In some cases, the impact is also familial and emotional: one man had left behind a pregnant partner at the time of his arrest; she disappeared with the child, leaving the family without any news.

The economic consequences are also severe. Often, people sentenced to death were the family’s main breadwinners. Their imprisonment profoundly disrupted the household. Many families highlighted the effects on children: “We don’t have enough money to send them to school.”

CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD: CONTROLLED AND FRAGILE

Some prisons allow visits from external actors, including religious groups, NGOs or the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC). During the 2018 fact-finding mission, a National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture (NMPT) was in the process of being established, with its mandate entrusted to the CHRC. Cameroon signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) in December 2009, which obliges states to establish an independent national preventive mechanism to carry out regular visits to places of detention and make recommendations. Effective implementation of this mechanism, particularly in the places where investigations take place, could help reduce acts of violence, and thus limit the risk of miscarriages of justice that could lead to death sentences. In 2019, the Cameroonian authorities had not ratified OPCAT.

Since the fact-finding mission, Cameroon has still not ratified OPCAT. However, the CHRC was officially designated as the NMPT, and its mandate and powers were set out in a law adopted in 2019. Several prison officials indicated that the CHRC had indeed carried out prison visits. However, although an annual report compiling the mechanism's findings, recommendations and opinions is produced, this document remains completely inaccessible to civil society and the families of detainees. The 2019 law stipulates that these reports are exclusively forwarded to the competent authorities.¹⁰³ This restriction undermines the preventive spirit of OPCAT: without transparency or the possibility for independent actors to examine the mechanism's findings, civil society's oversight role is limited, as is the impact of the recommendations addressed to the State.

Furthermore, several organisations interviewed described significant restrictions on their interactions with detainees. In Buea, one organisation deplored the total lack of confidentiality during interviews, very limited visiting time and, in some cases, outright refusal of access. In Bafoussam, NGOs are not permitted to enter all wings of the prison, leaving some detainees severely isolated.

Conditions for family visits vary widely across facilities. In some prisons, the rules appear to be relatively flexible. In Dschang, Alain said that when his wife visits, "We have as much time as we need to talk." Cédric confirmed that visits are not time-limited and that prison officers let him speak to his children without restriction. In Yaoundé, several detainees stated that visits from minor children are permitted and that relatives can come several times a month. In Maroua, some prisoners said that their families can visit them "at any time", despite a theoretical prohibition. One person, however, noted that "often, visitors are turned away".

This apparent openness contrasts with recurring obstacles in other facilities. In Yoko, visits are strictly regulated, sometimes limited to 20 minutes, and minor children are not allowed. In Douala, families must pay for a "visiting pass" and sometimes additional sums to see their relatives. One person sentenced to death interviewed said that he even had to pay the prisoner tasked with fetching him from his wing for visits. In Bangangté, several people reported that although visits are theoretically allowed, families no longer come, discouraged by the "harassment" and demands for bribes at the entrance. Some women also reported instances of "sexual harassment" when attempting to visit a relative.

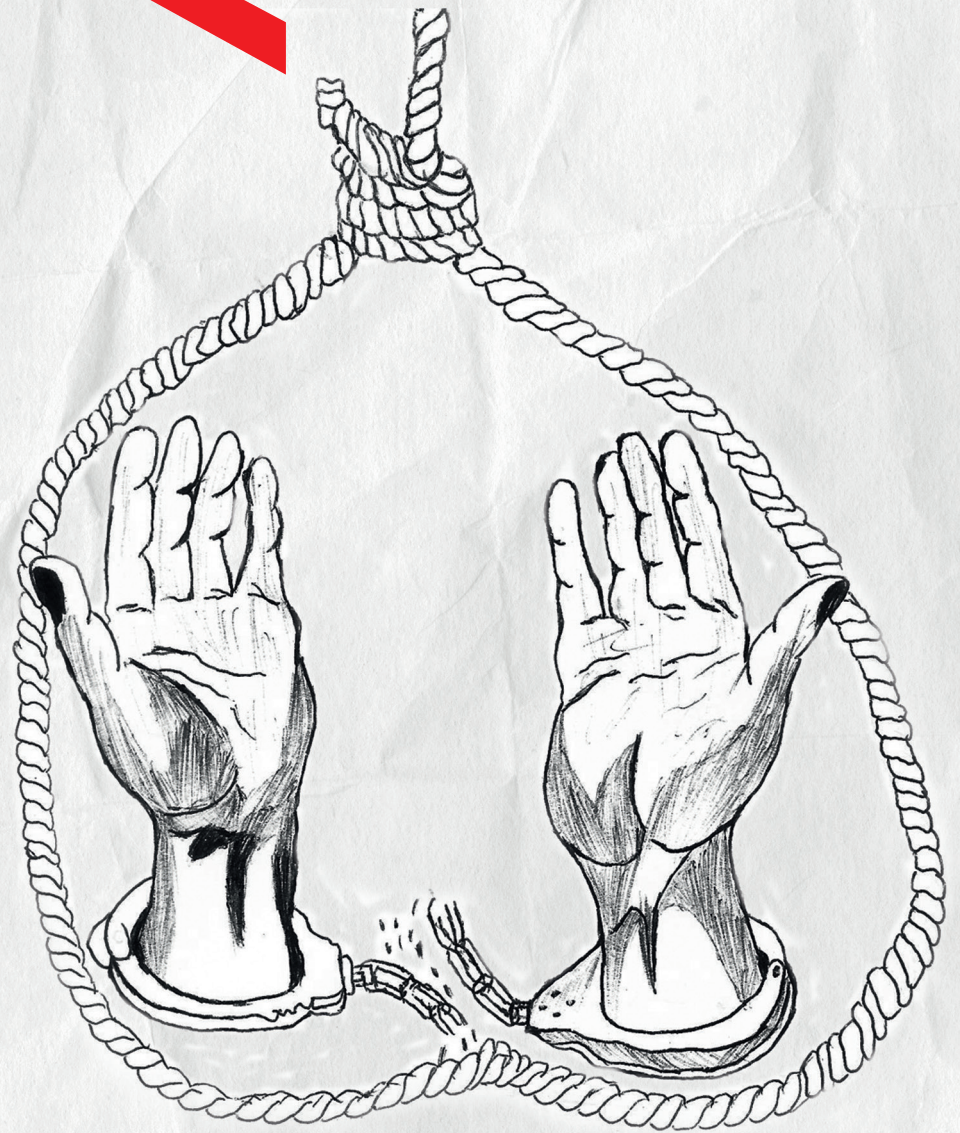
Added to these obstacles are the distance and length of detention, which contribute to the gradual erosion of family ties. Junior explained that after his transfer to Bafoussam, his friends stopped visiting him due to the cost of travel. Geographical distance is a major barrier for foreign nationals: in Maroua, Bello, a Nigerian citizen who had been sentenced to death for ten years at the time of interview, had never received a visit from his family. In this prison, where several foreign nationals are sentenced to death, no steps have been taken to establish contact with the Nigerian consular authorities, who therefore do not visit their nationals in detention. As the previous sections have shown, the absence of visits has serious consequences: it is often relatives who provide food, medicine, clothing or money, which are essential for survival during a very long period of detention marked by severe material deprivation.

¹⁰³ Section 42(2), Law No. 2019/14 of 19 July 2019 relating to the establishment, organisation and functioning of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC).

A National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture with limited impact

2019	2025
<p>Ten years after the signing of OPCAT in 2009, Cameroon had still not ratified it. However, a National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture was in the process of being established and it was planned that its mandate would be carried out by the National Human Rights Institution.</p>	<p>Although OPCAT has still not been ratified, the CHRC officially assumes the role of National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture. The CHRC conducts visits, but its reports to the authorities are not made public.</p>

CONCLUSION



The death penalty in Cameroon continues to be imposed within an institutional framework characterised by persistent structural obstacles that undermine the right to a fair trial, the protection of physical and mental integrity, and respect for human dignity. From the moment of arrest through to the exhaustion of legal remedies, the criminal justice trajectory of those sentenced to death unfolds in a context where investigations are frequently conducted under duress, legal assistance remains largely illusory, challenging the charges is often impossible, and cases remain unaddressed for years. Some die in detention, having waited decades for legal remedies that never materialised.

This is a profoundly human issue. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, food shortages and very limited access to healthcare – including psychiatric care – create an environment where suffering becomes a daily experience, marked by depletion, distress and abandonment. The testimonies gathered from people sentenced to death reveal constant fear, persistent physical and mental harm, and a widely shared feeling of having been forgotten by the state. The people interviewed are asking to be heard and recognised. It is the responsibility of the Cameroonian state to respond to this demand.



RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CAMEROONIAN AUTHORITIES

In addition to calling on Cameroon to abolish the death penalty, the fact-finding mission urges the Cameroonian authorities to undertake the following measures:

▶ ADVANCE TOWARDS THE ABOLITION OF THE DEATH PENALTY

- Enshrine the moratorium on executions in law and ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty.
- Support the United Nations resolution calling for a universal moratorium on the use of the death penalty.
- Commute the sentences of all individuals sentenced to death, including those convicted of terrorism-related offences.

▶ COMBAT TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT

- Publicly condemn, at the highest level, the use of torture and ill-treatment by security forces.
- Ensure that all individuals facing the death penalty are represented by a lawyer of their choice from the moment of arrest.
- Ensure that all allegations of torture, ill-treatment or procedural irregularities are subject to independent and thorough investigations, leading to effective sanctions.
- Ensure that confessions obtained under torture or duress are deemed inadmissible.

▶ STRENGTHEN PROCEDURAL SAFEGUARDS IN DEATH PENALTY CASES

- End prosecutions based on vague or overly broad charges, particularly under the 2014 counter-terrorism law.
- Restrict the jurisdiction of military courts and exclude civilians from their jurisdiction, including for terrorism-related offences.
- Ensure free and effective legal assistance from arrest throughout proceedings, providing court-appointed lawyers with sufficient resources to ensure high-quality legal representation.
- Remove obstacles to the exercise of legal remedies in death penalty cases.

- Guarantee the presence of a qualified interpreter for defendants not fluent in the language of the proceedings.
- Systematically inform foreign nationals of their right to consular assistance, from the investigation phase onwards, and ensure that this right is effectively exercised.
- Follow up the petitions lodged by individuals who have been detained for decades, in particular André Nguenji (Bafoussam prison), Bienvenu Onguéné (Yaoundé prison), Philippe Dongmo, and Fabien Tsafack (Dschang prison), whose petitions were filed nearly 40 years ago, and, if their case files cannot be located, grant them a pardon.

▶ ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROCESS

- Strengthen training for judges and prosecutors on criminal responsibility and the assessment of individuals with mental health disorders.
- Require an independent psychiatric assessment where there are serious doubts about the mental state of a person facing the death penalty.
- Grant a pardon to Christian Nana and others with mental health conditions to enable them to access appropriate medical care.

▶ IMPROVE DETENTION CONDITIONS

- Significantly increase budgets for prison food and healthcare, taking prison population growth into account, and take measures to address overcrowding.
- Guarantee regular access to free healthcare, including specialist care, and establish a free referral system for care outside prison.
- Introduce systematic screening and psychiatric follow-up for people sentenced to death to prevent and treat disorders associated with long-term detention.
- Ensure that people sentenced to death can receive visits from their families, including children, and their legal counsel without hindrance or threat.
- Prohibit, in law and in practice, the use of violent or humiliating methods, including shackling, as disciplinary measures.

▶ STRENGTHEN EXTERNAL OVERSIGHT AND TORTURE PREVENTION MECHANISMS

- Ratify OPCAT and deposit the instruments of ratification with the United Nations.
- Amend the law on the NMPT to allow the CHRC to publish its reports freely.

▶ PUBLISH DATA ON THE DEATH PENALTY

- Establish a national system for the collection and annual publication of disaggregated data on the death penalty, including: number of death sentences handed down per year and per offence; number of people currently sentenced to death, their gender, age, nationality and place of detention; number of deaths in detention among those sentenced to death and their causes; number of sentences upheld, overturned or amended on appeal and cassation (review on points of law); and number of commuted sentences and pardons granted.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ACTORS

▶ STRENGTHEN ADVOCACY WITH THE CAMEROONIAN AUTHORITIES

- Conduct sustained and coordinated advocacy for the abolition of the death penalty, transparency in death penalty data, and the prevention of torture and ill-treatment.
- Encourage authorities to adopt concrete measures to improve the criminal justice process, guarantee the rights of the defence and reduce the risk of miscarriages of justice in death penalty cases.
- Emphasise in political dialogue the need for regular, confidential and unhindered access for national and international organisations working with detainees.

▶ SUPPORT LOCAL INITIATIVES

- Fund legal assistance and representation schemes, as well as initiatives to improve prison conditions, particularly those implemented by civil society.



ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: STATUS OF RATIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL INSTRUMENTS (CAMEROON)

Treaty	Date of signature	Date of ratification / accession (a)
International instruments		
CAT - Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment		19 Dec. 1986 (a)
OPCAT - Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	15 Dec. 2009	
ICCPR-OP2-DP - Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty		
CED - International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	06 Feb. 2007	
CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	06 June 1983	23 Aug. 1994
CERD - International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	12 Dec. 1966	24 June 1971
CMW - International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	15 Dec. 2009	
CRC - Convention on the Rights of the Child	25 Sept. 1990	11 Jan. 1993
CRC-OP-AC - Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict	05 Oct. 2001	04 Feb. 2013
CRC-OP-SC - Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography	05 Oct. 2001	
CRPD - Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	01 Oct. 2008	
ICCPR - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights		27 June 1984 (a)
ICESCR - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights		27 June 1984 (a)
Regional instruments		
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child	16 Sept. 1992	05 Sept. 1997
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights	23 July 1987	26 June 1989
OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa	10 Sept. 1969	07 Sept. 1985
Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa	25 July 2006	13 Sept. 2012

ANNEX 2: OFFENCES PUNISHABLE BY THE DEATH PENALTY IN CAMEROON

Source	List of offences
Penal Code	
Penal Code (2016)	Premeditated murder; ¹⁰⁴ murder of a person under the age of 15 and murder of an ascendant; ¹⁰⁵ aggravated theft resulting in death or grievous bodily harm; ¹⁰⁶ kidnapping of a minor followed by death; ¹⁰⁷ treason; ¹⁰⁸ espionage; ¹⁰⁹ acts undermining the territorial integrity of the state in time of war; ¹¹⁰ civil war; ¹¹¹ assault on a public servant with intent to cause death; ¹¹² depredation by a band in time of war. ¹¹³
Special legislation	
Law regulating policing within the port area (1983)	Theft within the port area using a means of transport, or theft within the port area committed by a group of at least two persons. ¹¹⁴
Law on radiation protection (1995)	Wilful destruction of all or part of a radioactive source or nuclear installation. ¹¹⁵
Law on the suppression of acts of terrorism (2014)	Acts of terrorism; financing of acts of terrorism; laundering of proceeds of terrorism; recruitment and training for terrorism. ¹¹⁶
Law on the general regime of weapons and ammunition (2016)	Development, manufacture, or use of chemical weapons by a group; ¹¹⁷ possession, use, transfer, sale, or dispersal of nuclear materials resulting in death; threats to use nuclear materials to kill or injure others or damage property resulting in death. ¹¹⁸

104 Article 276, Penal Code.

105 Article 275, Penal Code, read in conjunction with Articles 350 and 351.

106 Article 320(2), Penal Code.

107 Article 352 and 353, Penal Code, read in conjunction with Article 354.

108 Article 102, Penal Code.

109 Article 103, Penal Code.

110 Article 111, Penal Code.

111 Article 112, Penal Code.

112 Article 156(5), Penal Code.

113 Article 236(3), Penal Code.

114 Article 12, Law No. 83/016 of 21 July 1983 regulating policing within the port area.

115 Article 9, Law No. 95/08 of 30 January 1995 on radiation protection.

116 Articles 2-5, Law No. 2014/28 of 23 December 2014 on the suppression of acts of terrorism.

117 Article 58, Law No. 2016/015 of 14 December 2016 on the general regime of weapons and ammunition.

118 Article 71(a) and 71(d), Ibid.

Code of Military Justice (2017)	Desertion in wartime or with conspiracy; abstraction of items from a member of the armed forces in a zone of operations, with use of violence; treason; collusion with the enemy; espionage; hiring by the enemy, where the offender is a soldier.
Law to punish offences against civil aviation safety (2017)	Use of an aircraft in service to cause death ¹¹⁹

119 Article 10, Law No. 2017/013 of 12 July 2017 to punish offences against civil aviation safety.

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- Penal Code.
- Criminal Procedure Code.
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- Decree No. 2020/193 of 15 April 2020 to commute and remit sentences.
- Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Fair Trial and Legal Assistance in Africa, 2003.
- Law No. 2019/14 of 19 July 2019 relating to the establishment, organisation and functioning of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC).
- Law No. 2016/015 of 14 December 2016 on the general regime of weapons and ammunition.
- Law No. 2017/013 of 12 July 2017 to punish offences against civil aviation safety.
- Law No. 2014/28 of 23 December 2014 on the suppression of acts of terrorism.
- Law No. 95/08 of 30 January 1995 on radiation protection.
- Law No. 83/016 of 21 July 1983 regulating policing within the port area.
- Ordinance No. 72/16 of 28 September 1972.
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
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ANNEX 4: DECREE NO. 2020/193 OF 15 APRIL 2020 TO COMMUTE AND REMIT SENTENCES

REPUBLIQUE DU CAMEROUN
PAIX – TRAVAIL – PATRIE

2020/193 15 AVR 2020

DECREE N° _____ OF _____

To commute and remit sentences

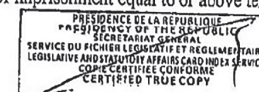
THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC

MINDFUL of the Constitution;
MINDFUL of Law N°2016/07 of 12 July 2016 relating to the Penal Code;
MINDFUL of Law N°82/14 of 26th of November 1982 to lay down the organization and functioning of the Higher Judicial Council.

HEREBY DECREES AS FOLLOWS

Article 1: Persons whose sentences have become final as at the date of signature of this decree shall benefit from remission as follows:

1. Commutation of the death sentence to life imprisonment in favor of persons initially sentenced to death;
2. Commutation to 25 (fifty five) years in favor of persons initially sentenced to death and whose sentence has already been commuted to life imprisonment;
3. Commutation to 25 (fifty five) years in favor of persons initially sentenced to life imprisonment that has not yet been commuted;
4. Remission of five (5) years in favor of persons initially sentenced to death and whose sentence has already been commuted to a term of imprisonment;
5. Remission of five (5) years in favor of persons initially sentenced to life imprisonment that has already been commuted to a term of imprisonment above ten (10) years;
6. Remission of five (5) years in favor of persons initially sentenced to life imprisonment that has already been commuted to a term of imprisonment below or equal to ten (10) years;
7. Remission of three (3) years in a favor of persons initially sentenced to a term of imprisonment equal to or above ten (10) years;



8. Remission of three (3) years in favor of persons initially sentenced to a term of imprisonment below ten (10) years but above five(5) years;
9. Remission of two (2) years in favor of persons initially sentenced to a term of imprisonment below five(5) years but above three (3) years;
10. Remission of one (1) year in favor of persons initially sentenced to a term of imprisonment below or equal to three (3) years;
11. Remission of one (1) year of sentence in favor of persons who have to serve a term of imprisonment below or equal to three (3) years.

Article 2: For the application of the remission provided here in above, minors within the meaning of criminal law who have been sentenced shall in addition benefit from one third of the applicable remission.

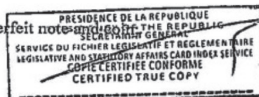
Article 3: a) The commutation provided under Article 1 (1), (2) and (3) above shall take effect from the date of signature of this Decree, the said date being the starting point for the calculation of the remaining term of imprisonment to be served.

b) In case of consecutive sentences, the provisions of Article 1 shall apply to the sentence being served on the date of signature of this Decree, and where the person is free, they shall apply to the sentence to be served first.

c) In case of concurrent sentences, remission, shall apply to the sentence to be served.

Article 4: The provisions of Article 1 of this Decree shall not apply to:

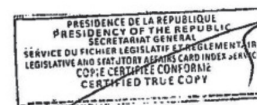
- Fugitives at the date of signature of this Decree;
- Recidivist offenders ;
- Persons imprisoned and sentenced for an offence committed while in detention;
- Persons sentenced for the following offences:
 - Security of the state;
 - Offences of chapter II of Law n° 2014/028 of 23rd December 2014 on the suppression of acts of terrorism;
 - Misappropriation of Public Property;
 - Corruption, indulgence (undue demand), favor, procuring favoritism, influence, interest in grant;
 - Undue influence and undue demand, counterfeiting notes and coins.



- Customs or tax fraud;
- Fraud in official and other examinations;
- Fraudulent export of currency;
- Illegal possession and trafficking of toxic waste;
- Illegal possession and trafficking of narcotic;
- Breaches against legislation on arms;
- Breaches against forestry legislation;
- Torture;
- Rape, sexual assault, pedophilia.

Article 5: The Minister of state, Minister of Justice, Keeper of Seals is responsible for the implementation of this Decree which shall be published according to the procedure or urgency, and inserted in the Official Gazette in English and French. /-

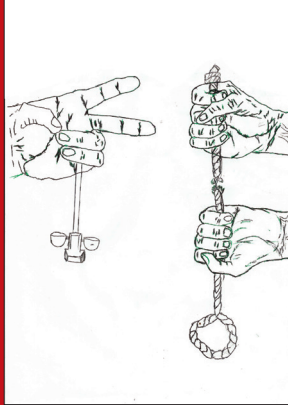
YAOUNDE, the 15 AVR 2020



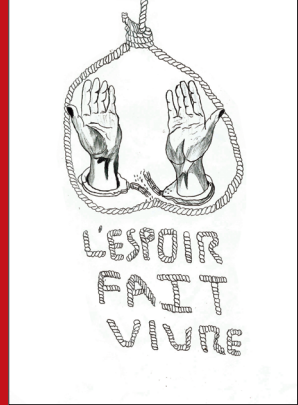
The illustrations featured in this report are drawings created by young participants from Cameroon as part of the 5th and 6th editions of the 'Draw Me Abolition' competition organised by ECPM and the International Network for Education on Abolition.



Singo Ndi Marcel



Tekam Arnold Martial



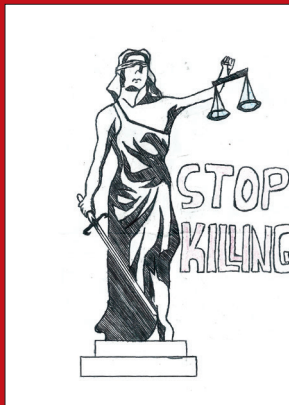
Nida Pascal Georges



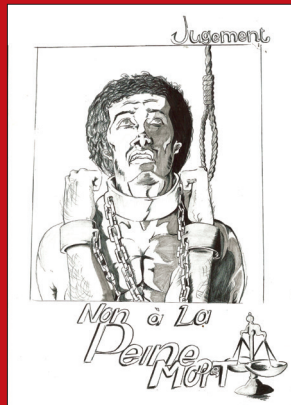
Tesimo Junior Wilfrid



Tagne Kupou Patrick



Degha Nguetsa Thuram Cardin



Sébastien Landry Onana

LIVES ON HOLD
THE SITUATION OF PEOPLE
SENTENCED TO DEATH IN CAMEROON

FACT-FINDING
MISSION REPORT

“They put me on the swing and hung me up for hours. I confessed to everything. I told the court about it, but it wasn’t taken into consideration.”

– **Junior, incarcerated in Bafoussam**

“I don’t know what was written or reported about me. I signed without actually being heard... At the Court of Appeal, the interpreter didn’t understand my dialect and I wasn’t allowed to speak in the proceedings. I didn’t even understand the meaning of the verdict.”

– **Kabiru, incarcerated Nigerian national**

This report is the result of a fact-finding mission carried out in Cameroon between March and October 2025 by the Cameroonian association Droits et Paix, the Network of Cameroonian Lawyers Against the Death Penalty (RACOPEM) and ECPM. The team of investigators visited 10 prisons, meeting 45 people sentenced to death and 6 prison staff members.

Carole Berrih, PhD in Public Administration and author of this report, draws on the testimonies gathered by the research team and contextualises them against a backdrop of limited progress on the death penalty, despite a decline in the number of death sentences over the past decade. This report follows on from the 2019 fact-finding mission, “Sentenced to Oblivion”, and forms part of the series “Fact-Finding Missions on Death Row”, which provides an overview of the living conditions of people sentenced to death in various countries around the world. The aim is both to report on the reality of death row and to engage the authorities and public opinion.



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