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US Deportations Ignite Cameroon Abuses Ignoring Refugee Protections



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Human Rights Watch's February 20, 2026 report unveils a harrowing escalation of human rights violations in Cameroon triggered by aggressive US deportation practices targeting third-country nationals from war-torn regions like Sudan and Somalia. Since late 2025, over 150 individuals have been swiftly removed under a stringent state policy prioritizing rapid enforcement over thorough asylum evaluations, landing them in Douala where Cameroonian authorities impose arbitrary detentions, brutal beatings, and extortion demands ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 per detainee.

This pattern not only shatters the non-refoulement principle—a bedrock of international human rights (<https://impactpolicies.org/categories/3/business-human-rights>) law prohibiting returns to harm—but also exposes systemic flaws in US state policy that ignore documented perils, including incommunicado holds lasting weeks without charges and denial of basic asylum processing.

Historical Context of Deportation Patterns

The current crisis builds on a troubling precedent of US deportations to Cameroon dating back to 2019–2021, when nearly 190 Cameroonian asylum seekers endured similar fates despite credible fears rooted in the Anglophone separatist conflict raging since 2017. Back then, deportees faced torture, rape, enforced disappearances, and inhumane conditions across Cameroon's Centre, Littoral, North-West, and South-West regions, with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) employing excessive force like painful restraints and solitary confinement in at least 24 documented instances.

This state policy of expedited removals assigned cases to immigration judges with denial rates 10–30 points above national averages, often detaining individuals for 1.5 years under jail-like conditions marred by medical neglect and racial bias, a blueprint replicated in the 2025–2026 surge under President Trump's reelection-driven enforcement priorities following his January 2025 inauguration.

Cameroon's instability as a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention amplifies these risks, positioning it as an unsafe third-country hub for US removals due to diplomatic convenience rather than humanitarian assessment. Deportees arrive stripped of protections, their confidential US asylum documents confiscated by gendarmes, enabling targeted reprisals that echo past horrors where women reported rape during interrogations.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has flagged a staggering 70% refoulement risk here, where forced returns to origin countries like Sudan—plagued by civil war—or Somalia compound traumas for those fleeing genocide and famine. This human rights quagmire underscores how US state policy inadvertently fuels a vicious cycle, transforming deportations into pipelines for extortion and violence without accountability mechanisms.

Mechanics of Abuses Post-Deportation

Upon touchdown in Douala, deportees confront immediate onslaughts from Cameroonian gendarmes wielding batons, subjecting at least 12 confirmed cases since late 2025 to arbitrary arrests and beatings, as detailed in recent fieldwork. Held incommunicado, victims endure demands for bribes to secure release, with no formal charges or access to legal aid, while human rights safeguards evaporate amid claims of "humane processing." One Sudanese man captured the betrayal,

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"They told us Cameroon was safe; it's a trap,"

a sentiment mirroring earlier deportees who described systematic mistreatment upon arrival, including physical assaults and coerced payments that plunge families into destitution.

These abuses extend beyond physical harm, encompassing psychological torment and economic ruin, as officials exploit deportees' vulnerability in a nation grappling with its own ethnic tensions and corruption. Historical parallels from 2020 reveal women beaten and violated, one recounting,

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"They hit me all over my body... They said that I had tarnished Cameroon's image so I had to pay for it,"

highlighting gendered dimensions of this state policy-induced crisis. No official death toll emerges from the 2026 wave, but the pattern of denial—coupled with forced repatriations—constitutes refoulement, breaching UN conventions against torture that bind the US. Cameroonian responses dismiss these as isolated, asserting

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"Cameroon is not a detention camp; we act per our laws,"

yet evidence from 41 prior interviews contradicts this, painting a picture of institutionalized predation enabled by unchecked US handoffs.

US State Policy and Enforcement Realities

The Trump administration's state policy frames these deportations as vital for national security, surging ICE operations post-2024 election without mandatory vulnerability screenings for third-country nationals, a lapse that propelled over 150 removals to Cameroon by early 2026. This mirrors 2020 spikes amid COVID-19, where protests from Congress and activists failed to halt flights, prioritizing volume over due process and confidentiality—key factors in post-deportation targeting. In 2024, the US granted humanitarian parole to 27 earlier deportees after abuses surfaced, admitting flaws, yet current trajectories suggest no such reprieves, with a coalition lamenting



"The 27 Cameroonian asylum seekers who have returned to the US suffered unimaginable abuse at the hands of both US and Cameroonian authorities."

ICE's practices, from prolonged detentions to biased adjudications, perpetuate a human rights deficit, where judges deem claims insufficient despite evidence of persecution. This state policy not only violates domestic oversight but international obligations, as asylum records shared inadvertently arm Cameroonian forces. Broader enforcement under Trump—emphasizing mass removals—has drawn scrutiny for ignoring trauma, with deportees from conflict zones arriving pre-traumatized only to face compounded horrors, underscoring a policy blind to global ripple effects.

International Human Rights Frameworks Breached

At its core, this scandal implicates profound breaches of human rights norms, particularly non-refoulement under the UN Refugee Convention and Convention Against Torture, which prohibit returns to foreseeable harm—a threshold Cameroon decisively crosses given its detention practices and regional volatility. Human Rights Watch articulates the outrage,



"US deportations to Cameroon expose people to grave dangers, including torture and refoulement, violating non-refoulement principles under international law,"

demanding an immediate halt to flights and safe resettlements elsewhere. UNHCR and Amnesty International amplify this, issuing joint moratorium calls amid warnings of cascading instability for Sudanese and Somali populations.

Cameroon's non-convention status exacerbates enforcement gaps, allowing state policy to exploit legal loopholes while human rights erode. Precedents like the 2022 HRW report "How Can You Throw Us Back?" detail US complicity through flawed screenings and force, patterns persisting into 2026 without reform. These violations ripple regionally, straining African asylum systems and fueling anti-migrant sentiments tied to economic pressures, where bribes sustain corrupt networks.

Geopolitical and Economic Ramifications

Geopolitically, US state policy leverages Cameroon's alliances, turning it into a deportation dumping ground amid Middle Eastern and African conflicts displacing millions. Sudanese civil war deportees, numbering prominently in the 150+, face return to atrocities, while Somali famine escapees encounter parallel fates, destabilizing neighbors like Chad and Nigeria. Economic fallout manifests in extortion cycles impoverishing deportees, who arrive penniless and depart deeper in debt, perpetuating poverty in origin states and undermining development aid efforts.

This dynamic bolsters Cameroonian corruption, where gendarme payoffs average thousands per flight, intertwining US enforcement with local malfeasance. Broader Trump-era rhetoric—prioritizing borders over human rights—sets precedents for allies, potentially normalizing unsafe third-country returns globally, from Libya to Rwanda, and eroding multilateral trust.

Long-Term Impacts on Vulnerable Populations

Deportees bear indelible scars: physical injuries from beatings, psychological trauma from isolation, and familial disruptions as relatives face harassment post-return. Women and children, disproportionately affected, endure heightened sexual violence risks, with 2020-2021 data showing rape as a detention tactic. Human rights advocates note elevated suicide ideation among survivors, compounded by origin-country reprisals enabled by leaked US data.

Children of deportees inherit instability, often separated during abuses, while community ties fracture under stigma. This state policy fallout amplifies global displacement, as failed US asylum drives illicit crossings elsewhere, overwhelming Europe and straining UNHCR resources budgeted at billions annually.

Pathways for Accountability and Reform

Reversing this demands multifaceted action: US state policy overhauls mandating (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/11/us-deported-cameroonians-suffered-serious-rights-violations-hrw>) screenings, impartial judges, and document safeguards, alongside parole expansions proven in 2024. Cameroon requires probes into gendarmes, asylum accession, and bribe eradication. International mechanisms—UNHCR monitoring, sanctions on violators—could enforce compliance, with NGOs pushing reparations funds for victims.

Civil society coalitions, echoing past successes, urge transparency in ICE flight logs and judicial oversight. Deportee testimonies like



"You left here ran ... the US telling lies the government"

galvanize momentum, framing reform as moral imperative amid eroding human rights landscapes.

Ultimately, US deportations ignite Cameroon abuses by design of flawed state policy (<https://impactpolicies.org/categories/4/state-policies>), sacrificing refugee lives on enforcement altars. Over 150 souls ensnared demand urgent reckoning, lest this blueprint proliferate unchecked.

Human Rights Watch Exposes US Deportations to Cameroon: Non-Refoulement Violations & Abuse Crisis

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