



Beyond the Laws: Rethinking Inclusive Education for the Visually Impaired in Cameroon's Public Schools, 1967-2024

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Abstract: *This paper explores the long and uneven journey toward inclusive education for visually impaired learners in Cameroon's public schools between 1967 and 2024. Using both documentary sources and oral testimonies, it reveals that, while Cameroon has adopted several progressive policies—most notably the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2022 Law on Inclusive Education—their impact on the ground has been limited. The study finds that many visually impaired learners continue to face exclusion due to poorly implemented policies, inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of learning materials in accessible formats and the absence of properly trained teachers. Social stigma and community misconceptions about disability further compound these problems. The paper argues that inclusion in education cannot be achieved merely through legal declarations; it requires deliberate investment, teacher preparation, and the transformation of social attitudes. Achieving this balance would give visually impaired learners a fair opportunity to learn and contribute meaningfully to national development.*

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Visual Impairment, Accessibility, Cameroon, Disability Policy, Education Reform*

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has increasingly become a cornerstone of global education reform, grounded in the belief that every child, regardless of ability or disability, deserves a place in mainstream learning environments. This principle, promoted by UNESCO's Salamanca Framework for Action (1994) and reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), calls on governments to create schools that welcome all learners. Cameroon officially embraced this idea through the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and later through the 2022 Law on Inclusive Education. Yet, for many visually impaired learners in the country, inclusion remains more an aspiration than a reality.

The country's first attempt to educate persons with visual impairment dates back to 1967 with the establishment of the Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind in Buea. This institution became a symbol of hope for many, but it also revealed the limitations of a system that relied too heavily on special schools and charitable efforts. Over time, missionary and non-governmental organizations stepped in to fill the void left by the state, establishing training centers and advocacy networks. However, their efforts could not replace a coherent national strategy. Although the state later developed frameworks to promote inclusion, these policies often lacked proper funding, trained personnel, and the necessary infrastructure to make them effective. This paper examines these contradictions and the broader evolution of inclusive education for the visually impaired in Cameroon between 1967 and 2024. It argues that, despite clear progress in legislation and advocacy, the distance between policy and classroom practice remains wide. Through historical reflection and contemporary evidence, the study highlights how institutional weaknesses, limited teacher preparation, and social prejudice continue to obstruct genuine inclusion. The discussion ultimately situates the Cameroonian experience within the broader African struggle to transform inclusion from a legal ideal into a lived educational reality.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CAMEROON

Cameroon's movement toward inclusive education has been gradual, complex, and shaped by both internal and external forces. Her commitment to inclusive education was also demonstrated through

both national and international actions. A major step towards ensuring inclusion was reflected in international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), first signed by the government on June 29, 2007, and ratified on August 1, 2011 (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). Article 24 of this convention emphasizes the right to education for all, without discrimination. Cameroon in 1983 promulgated the law on the protection of persons living with disabilities, but this legal framework was oriented towards social service provision and special caregiving to these persons, with very little opportunities made available for these individuals to receive formal education in Cameroon public schools. The orientation of segregated education as was conceived in the first special educational institution established in 1967 in Bavenga, (West Cameroon) known as the West Cameroon Blind Center, was later transformed into the Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind in 1970, when the government of the Federal Republic officially took over management of the center (NAB, 1967).

The desire to integrate learners with impairments into regular classrooms was only visible in mission empowerment centers that were established in the Republic as from 1982. In the North West Province, the first empowerment center that revolutionized education for these impaired learners was ST Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAL) and the Integrated School for the Blind in Kumbo established by the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Service (CBCHS) in 1984. Their presence in empowering these learners and integrating them into regular primary schools provoked the need for public schools to integrate these learners.

For the most case, these learners were integrated into the classroom after primary education with the responsibility of catering for their needs exclusively the responsibility of the mission centers. It was not until 1991 when the first visually impaired was fully admitted into a government public secondary school. The admission of this impaired learner into government Bilingual High School Kumbo later transformed the institution to the first public secondary school in nation to have opened its doors to the call for inclusive education. Others like government High School Bafut followed thereafter in 1997, with schools like GBHS Kumbo and GBHS Bamenda emerging to major inclusive centers for the visually impaired by 2010-2014 respectively (Ngong, interviewed 2025).

To give more impetus to developments and demands for inclusive education, The state officially changed its social orientation towards disability to that of empowerment and inclusion, repealing the 1983 law, with the passing of the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2018 text of application, and later through the 2022 Law on Inclusive Education. Yet, for many visually impaired learners in the country, inclusion remains more an aspiration than a reality. As mentioned earlier, the education of the visually impaired in Cameroon gained momentum in 1967 with the establishment of the first special school for the visually impaired in Buea, known as the Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind Buea (Sama, interviewed 2025).

This institution became a pivotal point for subsequent empowerment initiatives, as it was the only center in the nation where visually impaired individuals received training in braille and vocational skills, including agriculture. The establishment of a government primary school adjacent to the center in 1970 further supported these pupils who had been educationally neglected for a long time. However, it is important to note that, despite the state's efforts to integrate the visually impaired into the educational setting, these efforts primarily focused on restrictive special education settings, with the visually impaired not being integrated into regular public schools across the nation. The establishment of the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1975, with the purpose of providing welfare services to vulnerable populations, including the visually impaired, did not, in itself, ensure the inclusion of visually impaired individuals into regular classrooms.

It was not until 2010, as a result of pressure mounted on the state by the Cameroon Baptist Convention and organizations of disabled persons like Coordinating Unit of Associations of Persons with Disabilities, that the government of Cameroon initiated a more conscious approach towards inclusive education in public schools. Note here that, the period 1970-2010, the education of the visually impaired was primarily the responsibility of missionary institutions like the Cameroon Baptist Convention and the Catholic missions. A few of the visually impaired who had completed primary and secondary education by 2000, did so under the auspices of these faith base organizations in North West Province. (Nyingcho, interviewed 2025)

Law No. 83/13 of July 1983 and Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010, relating to the protection and welfare of persons with disabilities, demonstrated the country's legal framework for safeguarding inclusive education. The Ministries of Education under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs were responsible for implementing inclusive education policies, while the Ministry of Social Affairs assesses learners with disabilities and issues disability cards that enable access to tuition-free education (Ngoh 2010, 120). In 2015, the Ministry of Basic Education championed the development of a national inclusive policy for Cameroon which was eventually realized in 2022, when the government of Cameroon legislated the policy as the new state instrument for fostering inclusive education for the visually impaired (Ngoh, 2010:120).

3. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Despite this seemingly robust framework, the reality on the ground tells a different story. According to Sight savers report of 2017, disability significantly impacted school enrollment, quality of education, and graduation rates. Although the legal and institutional framework existed, children with disabilities still encounter numerous challenges in accessing mainstream education. For instance, a study by Ngoh highlighted that while policies exist on paper, there is a lack of systematic implementation and monitoring, leading to disparities in educational access for visually impaired students(Sightsavers, 2017:1=30).

4. GAPS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

One of the most significant barriers to inclusive education for visually impaired students in Cameroon was the lack of appropriate infrastructure and accessible learning environments. Most, if not all public schools in Cameroon prior to 2010, lacked essential facilities such as ramps, tactile pathways, and accessible classrooms, making navigation difficult for visually impaired students.(Selete, 2004:35) Mawutor and Selete emphasize the importance of accessible resource rooms, noting that prime consideration should be given to accessibility when choosing a room, ensuring it is easy and safe to enter and exit with minimal problems. The absence of these critical features did not only hampered students' mobility but also their ability to engage with educational materials effectively (Mawutor and Selete, 2004:38). Effective inclusive education relies heavily on trained and supportive teachers. However, many public schools in Cameroon lacked the necessary training to support visually impaired students effectively. A lack of specialized training led to teachers feeling ill-equipped to address the unique needs of these students, resulting in a lack of engagement and support in the classroom.

Research by Longla indicated that many teachers in Cameroon had not received training in inclusive pedagogy, which was essential for adapting teaching methods to accommodate students with diverse needs(Longla, 2012:15). Furthermore, teacher training programs often do not include modules on visual impairment or the use of assistive technologies, leaving educators unprepared to meet the challenges posed by inclusive classrooms (Longla, 2012:33).

Access to appropriate educational materials and assistive technologies was crucial for visually impaired students. However, Braille book reflecting the standard curriculum, or audio documents and assistive devices were not readily available in public schools. This absence restricted visually impaired students' ability to participate fully in the curriculum, impacting their academic performance and self-esteem. In a related interview conducted with the visually impaired students, it was revealed that, they did not have any text book in the market in braille or audio format. This to them defeated the very core features of inclusive education (Kum Nji, interviewed, 2025).

It was not until 2021, that some non-governmental organizations like ST Barbra Johnson's Center for the Visually Impaired started changing the narrative, by donating text books for the visually impaired students in Cameroon public secondary schools. Their mission was to bridge the gaps of inclusion through the provision of readable materials to learners in public secondary schools in accessible formats. Secondary schools like Government Bilingual High school (GBHS) Dschang and Bamenda, were the very first across the nation to have benefited from these donations designed for the visually impaired learners in the years 2021 and 2024 respectively, in braille and audio formats. The special educational centers equally had provided excerpts of some materials in braille, but for the use of their impaired

learners. A typical example of such institution was Mbelle at Promhandicam School that was noted to have produced tailored learning materials for its diverse range of students, copying every textbook into Braille. (Mbah, interviewed 2025)

Picture 1. *ST Barbra Johnson's Center for the Visually Impaired Donating to Visually Impaired Students*



Source: B. B. Tokoh, 15 March 2024, Field notes photograph

Picture 1 shows ST Barbra Johnson's Center for the Visually Impaired Donating specialized books and other resources to Visually Impaired Students at Baptist Comprehensive High School Bamenda and Government Bilingual High School Bamenda in March 2024. The exercise was a modest effort to assist in bridging the gap that persist in the education of people with visual impairment.

Despite these efforts, the overall availability of text books in braille and audio formats remained largely unavailable across the country. The EDID program of the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBC) had made strides by creating a center for computer learning for students with visual impairment, equipped with assistive devices and customized software. However, these initiative were often localized and do not address the broader systemic inadequacies faced by visually impaired students nationwide (Sightsavers 2017).

Social stigma and discrimination had continuously presented significant barriers to inclusive education for visually impaired students in Cameroon. Negative societal perceptions led to bullying, isolation, and a lack of support within school communities. Kuyayama notes that stigmatization and discrimination often came from both the family and the larger community, leading to the isolation of children with disabilities (Kuyayama, 2011: 47). The cultural beliefs surrounding disability in Cameroon had frequently frame it as a curse or punishment, which alienated visually impaired students. This stigma not only affected the mental health and well-being of these students but also discouraged their families from advocating for their educational rights. For instance, parents withdraw their children from school due to fear of discrimination or bullying, further perpetuating the cycle of exclusion. Also, some visually impaired students revealed how social discrimination had destroyed their interest for schooling in the 1990s when they completed primary education (Yilla, interviewed, 2025). The involvement of parents and communities was essential for fostering inclusive educational environments. However, many parents of visually impaired children lack awareness of their children's rights and educational opportunities. Moreover, community support networks are often weak, leaving parents feeling isolated (Sightsavers, 2017:1-11). Research by Sightsavers in 2017, indicated that some parents of children with disabilities hold negative beliefs rooted in religious convictions and lack knowledge of Braille or sign

language, hindering their ability to communicate with their children or help them with their studies at home. The lack of parental engagement in educational processes not only undermines the potential for inclusive education but also limited the development of supportive community structures that could advocate for better resources and policies (Sight savers, 2017:25).

5. IMPLICATIONS OF INADEQUATE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The absence of accessible learning materials, specifically textbooks in Braille and audio formats in the Cameroonian educational community, represented a critical barrier to inclusive education for students with visual impairments in public secondary schools in Cameroon. This deficit had profound and multifaceted negative impacts, affecting not only their academic trajectory but also their social integration, psychological well-being, and future life prospects. Without textbooks in accessible formats, students with visual impairments were fundamentally denied the primary source of information for their studies. They could not independently read assigned chapters, prepare for lessons, or review material, leading to significant gaps in knowledge and understanding. This directly contravenes the principle of equitable access to curriculum (UNESCO 2017: 44).

Relying solely on teachers to read aloud or explain concepts slows down the learning process considerably and frustrates the impaired learners. While sighted peers quickly scan text, visually impaired students must wait, often missing nuances or being unable to re-read for clarification at their own pace. This created a perpetual state of academic disadvantage, making it difficult to keep up with the syllabus and achieve the required learning outcomes (Miles 2011:32). Subjects that are heavily text-dependent or require visual interpretation (e.g., mathematics with complex equations, sciences with diagrams, geography with maps, and literature with extensive reading) were incredibly challenging, if not impossible, without appropriate materials. This forces the students with impairment into a narrow range of academic paths, limiting their potential and future career options (Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018: 144).

Of equal importance was the fact that, Inaccessible study materials for these impaired learners, directly translated to inadequate preparation for examinations. The Students struggle to recall information they haven't adequately processed, understand questions presented in inaccessible formats, or complete timed assessments, leading to lower grades, academic failure, and increased dropout rates(Sama, interviewed 2025). Group work, silent reading tasks, or assignments requiring independent research from textbooks became exclusionary. Students with visual impairments were often left on the sidelines, unable to contribute meaningfully, which led to feelings of frustration and inadequacy (Rieser 2012: 15). The constant need for sighted peers or teachers to read materials aloud fosters dependency, hindering the development of independent learning skills. This dependency also strained relationships, making students feel like a burden rather than an equal participant (Humanity & Inclusion 2019:41). This further isolates them, preventing the formation of strong social bonds and a sense of belonging within the school community (Kum, interviewed 2025).

The continuous struggle to access learning content despite their best efforts for many interviewed, led to profound frustration, demotivation, and a sense of helplessness. This eroded their enthusiasm for learning and their overall engagement with school. Repeated academic struggles and social exclusion had severely damaged a student's self-esteem and confidence in Mezam division of Cameroon in 1989(Yilla, interviewed, 2025). They internalize negative perceptions of their abilities, believing they are incapable of learning or achieving success, even when the barrier is systemic and not inherent to their intelligence (WHO and World Bank 2011: 111). The pressure to perform in an inaccessible environment, coupled with the fear of failure and social judgment, resulted to significant anxiety and stress. This manifested in various ways, including school refusal, withdrawal, or behavioral challenges. A situation reported to have prevailed in the 1970s-2000(Nyingcho, interviewed, 2025).

A secondary education characterized by incomplete learning and academic struggles provided a weak foundation for pursuing higher education. This explained why a good number of visually impaired persons who were able to push through the difficult educational environment prior to 2005, did not enroll into the few existing universities in Cameroon, like the University of Yaounde1 established in 1962, University of Buea established in 1993, university of Dschang 1993 and University of Yaounde II established in 1993. It is worth noting here that, during this period, no visually impaired student was reportedly enrolled in the university, except for those who had studied out of Cameroon. Infarct, a

majority of these individuals in the 1970s and 1980s, had limited their education to primary school with a few of these individuals obtaining the First School Living Certificate (FSLC) (Mbah, interviewed 2025).

For those that completed secondary education, they did so in mission schools with a few supported by the mission resource centers to study in government schools, within the district where these missionary resource centers were found. For instance, persons with visual impairment who studied in Bafut government secondary school (GHS Bafut) between the years 1997-2005, did so under special arrangements with the ST Joseph Adult and Children Home Mambu (SAJOCAM), resource unit for the visually impaired established in 1982 by the Sisters of ST Francis Catholic Mission. This situation was very common with those who were enrolled into government Bilingual High School Kumbo, where the Integrated School for the Blind had been established by the CBCHS in the 1980s. It should be noted that, non-of these public schools in Bui division particularly Kumbo and Bafut in Mezam had officially been declared by the state as inclusive institutions.

The admission of these impaired learners into some of these public schools in North West Province in the late 1990s and early 2000s was due to the key role faith based institutions played. Government secondary schools in Kumbo, Bamising, Bamenda and Bafut all became inclusive centers for these impaired persons under special arrangements until 2010. Kumbo became the first official inclusive center in the English speaking zone of the nation, with others like GBHS Bamenda following thereafter in 2012 (Nde, interviewed 2025). Universities and vocational training centers in Cameroon within the period 1967-2020, lacked accessible materials, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion. Without strong academic qualifications and the necessary skills developed through a comprehensive education, visually impaired individuals faced severe limitations in the job market.

This contributed to high unemployment rates among persons with disabilities and perpetuated economic marginalization (UNCRPD, Article 27). Teachers, often lacking specialized training in inclusive pedagogy or Braille, were burdened with the task of adapting materials, reading aloud, or finding alternative ways to convey information. This diverts their attention from other students and usually led to teacher burnout (Ebersold and Priestley 2018: 33). Also, When teachers have to spend disproportionate time assisting one student due to inaccessible resources, the quality of instruction for both the visually impaired student and their sighted peers suffers. Without accessible materials, the presence of students with visual impairments in public secondary schools becomes more integration than genuine inclusion. The students for the most case are noted to be physically present but remain functionally excluded from the core learning experience, undermining the very goals of inclusive education policy (Nyingcho, interviewed 2025).

The absence of Braille and audio textbooks for students with visual impairments in Cameroonian public secondary schools is not merely an inconvenience; it is a fundamental violation of their right to education and a major impediment to their holistic development. Addressing this gap is crucial for ensuring genuine inclusion, fostering academic success, promoting social equity, and enabling these students to become active and contributing members of society (Nde, interviewed 2025). Therefore, the gaps in inclusive education for visually impaired students in Cameroon had far-reaching implications, limiting their personal and professional development and potential contributions to society. The lack of adequate education perpetuated a cycle of poverty and dependency, as visually impaired individuals had difficulties securing formal employment in the private and public labor market (Nyingcho, interviewed 2025).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND PATHWAYS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The government of Cameroon had demonstrated a commitment to inclusive education through the adoption of a national policy aimed at delivering quality and equitable education for people with disabilities. This policy seeks to improve access to education and training institutions, involve people with disabilities in teacher training and evaluation, and develop partnerships to strengthen educational governance (Ngho 2010, 120). However, for these policies to be effective there must be a concerted effort to ensure that they are implemented consistently across all regions. Regular monitoring and evaluation of educational practices remain essential to identifying gaps and areas for improvement.

Significant investments remain vital to improve infrastructure in public schools, creating accessible environments that cater to the needs of visually impaired students. The Salamanca Framework

emphasizes that accessibility is one of the most important requirements in the development of inclusive education (UNESCO 1994). This requires not only physical modifications to school buildings but also the provision of assistive technologies and educational materials that accommodate the diverse needs of visually impaired students. Collaboration with NGOs and international organizations could provide the necessary funding and expertise to enhance infrastructure and accessibility to readable materials tailored to meet the needs of all learners as in the curriculum.

Professional development for teachers must be prioritized, equipping educators with the skills and knowledge needed to support visually impaired students effectively. Longla emphasizes that teachers now see inclusion as an excellent way of engaging all learners and becoming better teachers. (Longla 2012:40) Training programs should focus on inclusive pedagogies, the use of assistive technologies, and strategies for creating supportive classroom environments. Partnerships with organizations specializing in special education can provide valuable resources and training opportunities for teachers. Community awareness campaigns are essential to combat stigma and discrimination against visually impaired individuals. By fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding, communities will create more supportive environments for inclusivity.

Engaging community leaders, religious institutions, and local organizations in awareness campaigns will help challenge negative perceptions of disability. Workshops and seminars that educate parents and community members about the rights of children with disabilities can empower them to advocate for inclusive education. Collaboration with NGOs, international organizations, and community stakeholders was crucial for providing necessary resources and support. The Liliane Foundation collaborated with the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBC) to empower children with disabilities by increasing their attendance in mainstream government schools. These collaborative efforts serve as models for other initiatives aimed at improving the educational experiences of visually impaired students. Inclusion should be reflected in the national budget through a dedicated fund for special and inclusive education. Public-private partnerships can also be explored to sustain the production of learning materials and assistive technologies. Finally, an Independent National Council for Inclusive Education should be set up to monitor, evaluate and coordinate actions across ministries. Policy documents should be accompanied by measurable timelines and annual progress reports to ensure accountability.

7. CONCLUSION

The story of inclusive education for visually impaired learners in Cameroon is one of steady progress overshadowed by persistent challenges. This paper has examined the complex and multifaceted challenges hindering the successful implementation of inclusive education for visually impaired students within Cameroon's public schools between 1967 and 2024. While Cameroon has demonstrated a commitment to inclusive education through international conventions and national legislation, particularly the 2010 law on the rights of persons with disabilities and that of 2022 on Inclusive Education, the reality on the ground reveals a significant chasm between policy aspirations and practical application.

The historical trajectory of educating the visually impaired, beginning with the establishment of the Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind Buea in 1967, highlights a crucial shift from segregated special education towards integration. However, this integration has largely remained superficial, failing to translate into true inclusion within mainstream public schools across the nation. The central argument that ran through this analysis is that the inclusive education policy in Cameroon, while well-intentioned, is undermined by a weak and insufficiently funded implementation framework. This weakness manifests in several critical areas. The absence of accessible learning materials, adapted curricula, and assistive technologies, such as braille resources, severely limits the ability of visually impaired students to fully participate in the classroom. Furthermore, the lack of appropriate infrastructure, including accessible buildings and adapted classroom environments, further exacerbates the difficulties faced by these students. The absence of trained educators, equipped with the skills and knowledge to effectively teach visually impaired students, also constitutes a major impediment to successful inclusion.

Despite the significant obstacles, this paper acknowledges the laudable achievements made in the realm of inclusive education in Cameroon, particularly the foundational work initiated with the establishment of the Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind Buea. However, the journey towards true and comprehensive

inclusion for visually impaired students remains far from complete. The paper emphasizes the urgent need for sustained and strategic government intervention, including substantial investments in infrastructural development, the provision of accessible curriculum materials, and the comprehensive training of educators. Only through a concerted and holistic approach, addressing the systemic weaknesses identified in this analysis, can Cameroon hope to fully realize the promise of inclusive education and ensure that visually impaired students have equal access to quality education and the opportunity to reach their full potential. Equally important is the work of changing mindsets—within families, communities, and schools—to ensure that disability is understood as part of human diversity. If these steps are taken with sincerity and consistency, inclusive education will no longer be an exception but a norm, giving visually impaired learners the dignity and opportunities they deserve. Bridging this divide between policy and practice is not just an educational duty; it is a moral one that speaks to the kind of society Cameroon aspires to build. Ultimately, bridging the divide between policy and practice is essential to creating a truly inclusive educational system that empowers all students, regardless of their abilities, to thrive. By documenting both historical milestones and contemporary realities, the paper offers a fresh, longitudinal perspective that highlights how systemic neglect and societal attitudes have shaped the experiences of visually impaired learners over nearly six decades. The paper also appreciates the impressive efforts Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) and ST Barbra John Center in mitigating some of the challenges inclusion discussed in the paper. It calls for a renewed understanding of inclusion as a moral and civic duty—a measure of how far a society is willing to extend equality beyond rhetoric into lived experience. In essence, this paper advocates for a shift from rhetorical commitment to practical transformation. The education of visually impaired learners must cease to be viewed as a welfare concern and be recognized as a constitutional right and a development priority. True inclusion will only emerge when the state, teachers, families, and communities work in harmony to ensure that every learner—sighted or visually impaired—has an equal opportunity to learn, succeed, and contribute to the building of a more just and inclusive Cameroon.

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