

From VOA Learning English, this is **Science in the News**. I'm Christopher Cruise.

And I'm Faith Lapidus. Today on the program we have three stories from the African nation of Cameroon. We report on efforts by the government to close illegal hospitals. We also tell about the country's ban on non-biodegradable plastic bags. And we report on some of the problems faced by Cameroonians as their country moves to digital technology.

Cameroon Works to Close Illegal Hospitals

Cameroon has launched a campaign against illegal hospitals and medical centers, including those that use traditional Chinese medicines. The Ministry of Health has blamed hospitals operating without official permission for causing deaths of patients.

Twenty-seven-year-old Mirabel Ndi watches helplessly as her two-month-old baby cries in pain. She and her baby have been at a private medical clinic in the city of Yaounde all night long. But she says there are no medical workers on duty.

“I came to the hospital and there is nobody to help.”

Since the government began closing what it considers illegal hospitals, some health workers have gone into hiding.

Bijoko Atnagan is the secretary-general of the country’s National Medical Council. He says the government will continue to take action against what it believes are illegal clinics.

He says a person only needs to go and see for themselves the growing number of hospitals across the country -- many of them operating illegally. He says all doctors working in such places, and who do not belong to the Council, are practicing illegally.

Andre Mama Fouda is Cameroon's Minister of Health. He says the government has identified 600 illegal hospitals and health centers.

He says the government is targeting hospitals all over the country. He says the government wants to know if they are operating legally and will close them if they lack permission to operate.

Even some of the hospitals that are operating legally have problems and may not be able to react effectively to emergencies.

Dr. Etoundi Albert works at the Central Hospital in Yaounde. He says the few workers at the hospital have too many people to care for.

He says the hospital can deal with up to eight emergencies at any one time. It can also handle 20 non-emergency cases at once. But he says it is very important that trained workers be available to treat Cameroonians so that when there is an emergency, the hospital will have the people and medical equipment to react quickly.

Dr. Nick Ngwanyam heads the Saint Louis Higher Institute of Health, which trains medical workers. He says the steps being taken to stop hospitals from operating illegally will save many lives.

He says “when it comes to medicine, there is no room for mistakes and so the action is welcome. You go to the hospital, there is the doctor who is genuine, then there is a nurse who is called doctor, the laboratory technician doctor, then the nurse aid doctor, and so doctor, which used to mean something,” he says “has become a generic name for somebody in a white coat.”

The government is also taking steps against health care workers who give traditional Chinese medicine to patients. But some Cameroonians, like Daniel Kum, believe the government should organize the practice of Chinese medicine, not ban it.

He says “after moving from one hospital to the other, I did not have drugs that could help me. But when I took the Chinese medication, especially what they call the One Bao, it helped me and I was happy.”

Cameroon Bans Plastic Bags

Cameroonians are returning to traditional ways of transporting food because of a ban on the production, sale and use of non-biodegradable plastic bags. People are now using large leaves from plantain trees to store food. But not everyone is happy about that.

It is early morning in Mfou, a town near Yaounde. Nka Pamela has come to a farm to buy plantain leaves. She has been doing this since the government’s decision to ban plastic bags.

Nka Pamela says many people want to buy plantain leaves. But she says they are difficult to find in many neighborhoods.

“At times the farmers will refuse to sell. There are times that they increase their prices so it makes it difficult for us to bring leaves to Yaounde to sell.”

At the Mfoundi market in Yaounde, people who sell food are now also selling leaves. Etta Deborah owns a restaurant. She says she uses the leaves for some traditional meals like corn fufu, koki, achu and mendumba.

“It is natural and then it is our African culture to use leaves for keeping of food and I want to protect my customers.”

But not everyone is happy. Cameroonian Ben Collins says he is worried about possible health risks.

“You don’t know the origin of the leaves. You don't know how the leaves are transported. You don't know how they were conserved. You don’t know the content of the chemical reaction between the leaf and the food. Some leaves sometimes are used for medicinal purposes and some people unknowingly take these leaves and they package their food with not knowing the effect.”

Dr. Agatha Tanya is a nutritionist and lecturer at the University of Yaounde. She says there is nothing to be worried about if plantain leaves are used in the right way.

“We can use leaves, natural leaves, which we have in abundance, and wrap food in it. And besides, these leaves have a very, very nice flavor.”

Others working at the market say leaves are not supposed to carry many things. Nevielle Ngalim sells bread in Yaounde.

“Where do they want us to put the bread and the cake? Will it be normal to put it in leaves? For me, it is not normal, the banning of the plastic.”

The Cameroon Association for the Defense of the Rights of Consumers says the government's decision was a mistake. Yvonne Tarkang works for the group.

"Unfortunately, the socio-economic aspect wasn't taken into consideration which means that if incentive measures are not put in place so many people within the sector will be affected. So we think that the government should come up with alternatives because non-biodegradable plastic bags are banned in Cameroon."

Cameroon decided to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags because they pollute waterways. They also can be seen lying on the ground in many areas. Plastic bags are brought to landfills, where they slowly break down. The resulting plastic particles then pollute the soil and water.

The government plans to work with private businesses to make packaging materials that are less harmful to the environment.

Cameroonians have until April to use up all of the plastic bags already in use. After that, people using the bags could face heavy fines or even time in jail.

Cameroon Struggles With Switch to Digital Television

Countries around the world are preparing to end their dependence on analog technology. The move to digital technology is set to take place by the middle of next year. There are many good reasons for going digital. Digital images are sharper and brighter than analog ones, and the sound is clearer. But many people in Cameroon are not ready for the changes. So the country has set up a National Commission to assist with the move to digital technology. The group says many people have old televisions that will not be able to receive digital signals. Tebo Mathias is a digital switchover expert.

“The population is supposed to be informed, they are supposed to be well-educated because you will not imagine an old person maybe in the village somewhere with his old radio set, one morning he is unable to tune to a station because the switchover has taken place and he was not aware.”

The cost of soon-to-be out-of-date televisions has been falling. Some experts fear manufacturers will send these TVs to Cameroon and sell them to people who do not know about the digital switch. So the government has banned the import of non-digital television sets. But that decision has angered many people like Germain Nfor, a secondary-school teacher in Yaounde.

“(The) government has not really sensitized the people on why they are banning the old type of TV, and after everything the plasma TVs are very, very expensive. I wish to ask if there are not other alternatives that one can use to capture images apart from the plasma TV?”

Guillaume Kimbi is a reporter. He says many Cameroonians do not have the money to buy a digital television.

“We are simply being taken by surprise and the new TV screens are not within the reach of the average Cameroonians, which therefore means that so many Cameroonians will no longer be able to watch TV if that switchover were to come around now.”

Importers of electronic goods are also worried. Panje Raoul is one of them.

“We are calling on the state to look for ways of supplying appliances that can transform the images from analog to digital,” he says. “Are we able to buy flat screens? Today the minimum wage in Cameroon is 23,000 CFA francs, so I do not know if a Cameroonian will be able to feed himself with such an amount and also buy a plasma screen. We are asking the state to reconsider its decision,” he says.

Digital TV receivers cost as much as \$1,000 in Cameroon. But the average salary there is about \$56 a month. Experts like Tebo Mathias say people must start saving money to buy the digital sets.

He says the decision made by the International Telecommunications Union to go digital next year will not be delayed.

“ITU has already decided that after that date, those countries that will refuse to switch will not be able to receive signals from abroad or their own signals will not be able to be transmitted to neighboring countries because of interference.”

Many experts agree that African countries must move toward digital technology. But they say people need to be guided through the process. They say there should be special telephone lines and major advertising campaigns to help people make the switch to digital.

This **Science in the News** was written by Christopher Cruise. Our producer was June Simms. I’m Faith Lapidus.

And I’m Christopher Cruise. Join us again next week for more news about science on the Voice of America.

