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**Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms**

## **Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa**

### **Report of the Secretary-General\***

#### *Summary*

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [72/187](#) and outlines the work of the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa from 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2019. It also describes the challenges faced by the Centre and opportunities for further engagement in the subregion.

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\* The present report was submitted after the deadline in order to reflect the most recent developments.



## I. Introduction

1. The Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa was established in 2001 at the request of the States members of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), pursuant to a resolution of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, adopted in April 1994, and to General Assembly resolutions [53/78 A](#) and [54/55 A](#).
2. The Centre also operates as the regional office for Central Africa of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), covering 10 States members of ECCAS: Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe.
3. In accordance with the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, established pursuant to General Assembly resolution [48/141](#), the Centre works for the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy through advocacy, dialogue and the provision of technical assistance and advisory services to Governments, parliaments, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations, the media, United Nations country teams and other partners.
4. The present report is focused on the activities of the Centre between 1 August 2017 and 31 July 2019 in Cameroon, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe. The Centre has started to work on the implementation of additional activities in Burundi, following the closure of the OHCHR presence in the country on 28 February 2019 at the request of the Government. Owing to limited financial and human resources, most of the activities outlined in the report were carried out in Cameroon, the host country of the Centre. The report does not cover countries of the subregion where there are human rights field presences.
5. It is important that the Centre benefits from adequate resources to implement its mandate in a subregion marred by political and social instability, the proliferation of armed groups, including terrorists, and significant governance limits, among other issues. Strengthening the capacity of the Centre is critical to effectively promote human rights and the rule of law as the backbone of sustainable peace and development and to contribute to the prevention of further conflicts and violent extremism in Central Africa, in partnership with governments, regional organizations and other United Nations system entities.

## II. Main developments affecting human rights in the subregion

6. As the Secretary-General noted in his report on the situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa ([S/2019/430](#)), the situation in Central Africa remained volatile and highly charged by recent electoral processes and security and human rights challenges.
7. In countries of the subregion, including Burundi, Cameroon, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, poverty has been exacerbated by increased instability, brought about by poor governance, corruption and the mismanagement of public funds. The non-realization of economic, social and cultural rights has continued to generate social tensions and protests against degrading standards of living. The influence of the executive over the judiciary and legislative bodies prevails in the subregion, undermining the delivery of justice and the adoption of legislation that is compliant with international human rights norms and standards, thus increasing impunity.
8. The threat posed by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin region remains a constant challenge. On 29 November 2018, the Presidents of Chad, the Niger and

Nigeria and the Prime Minister of Cameroon met in N'Djamena to review the security situation following an upsurge in attacks by Boko Haram. In a statement issued at the end of that meeting, they appealed for enhanced international support, an increased focus on operational cooperation and a renewed assault on all forms of terrorism and criminal acts, until peace is restored in the region.

9. Burundi, Cameroon and the Congo continued to be affected by political instability, with Cameroon facing the additional threat of terrorism. In the three countries, human rights have been infringed, in particular owing to measures taken to maintain order and combat terrorism, which affect the rights to life and security of persons, to freedom of opinion and expression, association and peaceful assembly and to adequate housing, food, education and health. Political instability persisted in Gabon as opposition parties continued to contest the results of the presidential elections held in 2016 and questioned the capacity of the President, Ali Bongo Ondimba, to rule.

10. In the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon, clashes between government forces and separatist armed groups have intensified since the second half of 2018. Human rights groups have reported general violence against civilians by all parties, including extrajudicial and summary executions, the destruction of property, the excessive use of force, and abductions and maiming by separatist armed groups. In May 2019, the International Crisis Group estimated that at least 1,850 people had been killed, including civilians, separatists and members of defence and security forces.<sup>1</sup> Freedom of movement, assembly and association have been seriously affected, with regular curfews enforced by administrative authorities and “ghost towns” imposed by separatists.

11. Hospitals, schools and private homes were torched and bridges damaged. The United Nations Children’s Fund reported on 24 July 2019 that over 80 per cent of schools in both regions were closed following threats and acts of violence by separatist armed groups, and at least 74 were destroyed<sup>2</sup> as a result of the crisis, depriving over 689,125 children, including 340,576 girls, of access to education.

12. While proponents of dialogue on both sides have been calling for measures that would foster dialogue between separatists and the Government, the prolonged pretrial detention of most of the anglophone leaders has further exacerbated tensions in the South-West and the North-West Regions.

13. The humanitarian situation in Cameroon worsened, with the number of internally displaced persons rising as a result of the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions. According to estimates by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 530,000 internally displaced persons from both regions in May 2019, and 262,831 from the Far North Region. Cameroon was also hosting 104,884 refugees from Nigeria and 285,173 from the Central African Republic.<sup>3</sup> In June 2019, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that, in 2019, 4.3 million persons were in need of humanitarian assistance in Cameroon, including 893,000 in the North-West and South-West Regions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See [www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/central-africa/cameroon/272-crise-anglophone-au-cameroun-comment-arriver-aux-pourparlers](http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/central-africa/cameroon/272-crise-anglophone-au-cameroun-comment-arriver-aux-pourparlers).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.unicef.org/press-releases/geneva-palais-briefing-note-situation-children-north-west-and-south-west-regions](http://www.unicef.org/press-releases/geneva-palais-briefing-note-situation-children-north-west-and-south-west-regions).

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR factsheet on Cameroon, May 2019: <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Cameroon%20Factsheet%20-%20May%202019.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/cmr\\_humanitarian\\_dashboard-1er\\_semestre\\_2019.pdf](http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/cmr_humanitarian_dashboard-1er_semestre_2019.pdf).

14. During her visit to Cameroon from 1 to 4 May 2019, the High Commissioner for Human Rights discussed with the Government and other stakeholders possible ways to address the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions, as well as human rights issues that emerged following the presidential election held in October 2018. The authorities expressed readiness to cooperate with OHCHR to address the human rights concerns that triggered social grievances and agreed to the deployment of a technical assessment mission to Cameroon. A week after the visit of the High Commissioner, the Prime Minister of Cameroon visited the North-West and South-West Regions and announced the willingness of the Government to engage in dialogue with the separatists.

15. Meanwhile, the result of the presidential election held in October 2018 has been widely contested by the opposition. Peaceful protests by the opposition Cameroon Renaissance Movement were met with violence by the security forces. In January 2019, at least 150 members and supporters of the Movement, including its candidate for the presidential election, were arrested and brought before a military court on charges including “insurrection” and “hostility against the fatherland”, in relation to the public demonstrations and the attacks on several embassies of Cameroon.<sup>5</sup> Such charges can lead to the imposition of the death penalty under criminal law. In June 2019, an estimated 288 sympathizers of the Movement were reportedly arrested during demonstrations, including in Yaoundé, Douala, Nkongsamba, Bafoussam and Bangangté. According to the Movement’s lawyers, some 111 people were released three days after being arrested, while some were allegedly subjected to torture and ill-treatment by the gendarmerie.

16. In Burundi, the human rights situation continued to deteriorate, with persistent reports of grave violations, including summary executions, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, sexual violence and threats to human rights defenders, as described in the report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Burundi (A/HRC/39/63). Members of the opposition remaining in Burundi continued to be victims of persecution. Some were reportedly killed, while others have been subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention, as well as torture. This situation has compelled most of the prominent opposition figures to leave the country. In 2018, the majority of the 130 international non-governmental organizations working in Burundi closed after the Government imposed stringent conditions, which undermined their independence, including a requirement to apply ethnic quotas in their staffing and Government control over their funding. On 3 June 2019, the Minister of the Interior, Patriotic Training and Local Development banned one of the few independent and vocal civil society organizations that was still operating in Burundi, Parole et action pour le réveil des consciences et l’évolution des mentalités, claiming in his letter that it was “was striving to tarnish the image of the country and its leaders in a bid to undermine peace and public order”.

17. On 28 June 2019, the Independent National Electoral Commission of Burundi released the electoral agenda, with municipal, legislative and presidential elections scheduled on 20 May 2020, senatorial elections on 20 June and cantonal elections on 24 August. There are concerns that the elections will not be inclusive, in particular as the inter-Burundian dialogue has remained stalled since 2016, with the Government of Burundi affirming that the process has ended. On 17 April 2019, the parliament of Burundi adopted a new electoral code, according to which, among other aspects that raise concern, the financial deposit required from presidential aspirants is doubled.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24384>, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=34689> and <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=34672>.

18. There are serious concerns that the situation will further degenerate in the context of the 2020 elections. The Government is increasingly using the Imbonerakure to suppress any opposing views, including through imposing financial contributions for the elections and the use of night patrols under the guise of monitoring security.

19. The political situation has contributed to the further increase in poverty and food insecurity, as the Government has not been able to mitigate the consequences of the suspension of support from major donors. Growing unemployment and the increased prices of basic commodities and services have negatively affected the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

20. In the Congo, opposition leaders arrested and detained following the 2016 presidential elections remain in prison. In March 2019, the Brazzaville Criminal Court sentenced André Okombi Salissa, a former candidate for the coalition of political parties, the Initiative for Democracy in Congo, to 20 years of imprisonment with hard labour. In May 2018, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the Appeal Court to sentence Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko to 20 years in prison. Mr. Moukoko had contested the outcome of the 2016 presidential elections and had been arrested and remanded in custody for acting against the internal security of the State. Since the dismissal of his appeal, he has not had access to his lawyer, his family or to medical care. These developments have generated a tense political climate ahead of the presidential elections that will be held in 2021.

21. In June 2018, the Government of the Congo signed a ceasefire agreement with the Ninja militia of Frédéric Bintsamou, also known as Pastor Ntumi, paving the way for a reconciliation process in which the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the former Ninja combatants is foreseen.

22. The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon were elected members of the Human Rights Council during the period covered by the present report, in October 2017 and October 2018, respectively. Neither made any specific pledges or commitments when applying for membership.

### **III. Activities of the Centre from 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2019**

23. During the reporting period, the Centre implemented activities included in its programme for 2017 (August to December), 2018 and 2019 (January to July), in the framework of the thematic priorities of the OHCHR management plans for 2014–2017 and for 2018–2021, in the following areas: strengthening the rule of law and accountability; protecting civic space and people's participation; integrating human rights into sustainable development; early warning, prevention of violations and protection of human rights in situations of conflict and insecurity; and increasing the implementation of the recommendations of international human rights mechanisms.

24. The Centre implemented activities in partnership with governments, national institutions, United Nations system entities and other international and national organizations. Its partnership with the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa has been instrumental in the implementation of some of its activities.

25. In keeping with the recommendation made by the General Assembly in its resolution [72/187](#), the Centre continued to organize information sessions for diplomatic representatives to inform them of its activities in the subregion. Representatives expressed appreciation for the work of the Centre in supporting governments in improving their human rights records. The Centre was encouraged to increase its engagement in the subregion and its cooperation with subregional and regional organizations to develop a common framework to help States to comply with their human rights commitments.

## **A. Strengthening the rule of law and accountability**

26. The Centre continued to build the capacity of law enforcement officers in Cameroon and the Congo to respect and protect human rights. In Cameroon, training activities were focused on ensuring respect for human rights norms in the policing of demonstrations and during counter-terrorism operations. Sessions for judicial police officers were conducted in collaboration with the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms, while military personnel were offered human rights training at the International School for Security Forces (Eiforces) in Yaoundé. In May 2019, the Government held initial discussions, in which it started to plan the institutionalization of human rights training in the curricula of the judicial police training institute and the training programme for Eiforces. A joint programme with the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force Office contributed to the training of over 50 law enforcement professionals involved in the fight against terrorism on human rights principles in law enforcement.

27. As a result of advocacy and technical support by the Centre, the law establishing the Cameroon Human Rights Commission was enacted on 19 July 2019. The reform, which commenced in 2011, was initially aimed at strengthening the independence and institutional capacity of the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms. However, the Government decided to establish a new institution to replace the existing Commission, with a broader mandate for its promotion and protection mandates, and the incorporation of the national preventive mechanism foreseen under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Under the new law, the institution's financial autonomy is guaranteed. Moreover, according to the new legislation, 30 per cent of the commissioners will be women. Although there will be 15 commissioners instead of 30 in the previous commissions, they will operate on a full-time basis instead of occupying a part-time role. The National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms will be operational until the new Commission is established.

28. In the Congo, reconciliation in the Pool department has been enhanced by a Peacebuilding Fund project, which allowed the Centre and other United Nations system entities, together with the Commission for the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, to build the capacities of law enforcement officers in ensuring respect for human rights in the context of the reconciliation process. In July 2019, with the assistance of the United Nations, the Government launched the National Dialogue Council, a consultative body whose mission is to advise the Head of State on settling conflicts in the country.

## **B. Protecting civic space and people's participation**

### **1. Participation of groups facing discrimination in political life**

29. With the continued support of the Centre, the election management body in Cameroon, the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the international non-governmental organization Sightsavers have contributed to important progress on enhancing the participation of marginalized groups in political life in Cameroon. For instance, following awareness-raising campaigns, the enrolment rate of persons living with disabilities increased from 0.11 per cent (8,367 individuals) to 0.51 per cent (34,103 individuals) of the total number of registered voters between 2011 and 2018.

30. Before the presidential elections held in Cameroon in 2018, the Centre, jointly with the above-mentioned partners, organized separate workshops to train 30 senior law enforcement officers, 150 media professionals and 33 members of civil society organizations, with a focus on promoting peaceful electoral processes, equality and participation for discriminated groups and inclusive elections for persons with disabilities. During the elections, the Centre observed the particular attention afforded to the right of persons with disabilities to vote. Problems of proximity and accessibility to polling stations were minimized compared with previous elections. The Centre trained over 70 representatives of civil society organizations to monitor human rights during the elections. All were able to operate freely.

31. The Centre continued to raise awareness among all political parties in Cameroon and Gabon to promote the political participation of marginalized groups. In May 2019, during a high-level round table organized by the Centre in Cameroon, representatives of the Government of Cameroon, political parties, the election management body in Cameroon and civil society agreed upon the importance of inclusive elections, taking into account the needs of women, indigenous peoples and persons living with disabilities. They also agreed on the need to review the Electoral Code and devised activities to be undertaken to promote human rights and consolidate peace and democracy. Drawing lessons from the conflicting relations that prevailed between the ruling party and the opposition during and after the electoral process, a discussion platform was established to pursue the dialogue and diffuse tensions.

## **2. Respect for freedom of opinion and expression**

32. In Cameroon, the Centre worked towards increasing the ability of media professionals and law enforcement officials (police and gendarmerie) to promote open spaces and support peaceful, inclusive and human rights-compliant electoral processes. From 5 to 7 September 2018, in Douala, the Centre and UNDP organized an awareness-raising workshop for law enforcement officers on security and the protection of media professionals, focusing on the protection of journalists' right to freedom of expression and access to information. The seminar was aimed at fostering a climate of confidence and collaboration between these two strategic actors in the electoral process.

33. Also in Cameroon, the Centre organized a series of activities to address hate speech, for 81 journalists from print, audiovisual and online media (including 26 women), aimed at those covering the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions. They examined the causes of hate speech in Cameroon and discussed strategies to combat them. A campaign against hate speech started in June 2019 as a result of those trainings. Journalists decided to develop a glossary of terms used in hate speech to avoid, and to establish a peer review mechanism to prevent offences and hate speech in the media.

## **C. Integrating human rights into sustainable development**

### **1. Promoting the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights**

34. Following training and technical support from the Centre, Hevea Cameroon, the Electricity Development Corporation, the Cameroon Development Corporation and the Société Équatoriale des Mines in Gabon have developed inclusive and human rights-compliant policies and practices. In August 2018, the Centre, in cooperation with the International Organization of la Francophonie,<sup>6</sup> convened a workshop in

<sup>6</sup> Since 2013, the International Organization of la Francophonie has been a strategic partner of the Centre in the area of business and human rights.

Douala, Cameroon, with those companies, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights of Gabon, representatives of the national human rights institutions of Cameroon and Gabon, the Public Contracts Regulatory Authority of Cameroon and the umbrella organizations of business entities in Cameroon and Gabon (the Groupement inter-patronal du Cameroun and the Confédération patronale du Gabon). Discussions were focused on the activities of business entities in the subregion in the light of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Participants noted that the future of business entities in the subregion could be better safeguarded by respect for human rights. The Groupement inter-patronal du Cameroun committed itself to ensuring sustained education and awareness-raising efforts for its members, including by offering a platform for the Centre to disseminate and promote the Guiding Principles. The workshop resulted in a working partnership between the Confédération patronale du Gabon and the above-mentioned Cameroonian companies to share experiences with business actors in Gabon. The Centre also organized follow-up missions to the Société Équatoriale des Mines, the Cameroon Development Corporation and the Electricity Development Corporation sites in order to ensure that the established mechanisms for managing complaints were functioning and effective. In Gabon, the Centre visited local communities around the Société Équatoriale des Mines mining sites in the Ogooué-Ivindo Province and urged the company's management to implement its previous commitments for development projects benefiting the local communities.

35. The Centre trained some 28 staff of the Cameroon Development Corporation and trade union representatives on the Guiding Principles, while a follow-up workshop for former employees of the Lom Pangar hydroelectric dam project was organized by the Electricity Development Corporation in Bertoua in the East Region of Cameroon. The workshop led to the adoption of a revised complaint mechanism and technical advice on the procedure for the treatment of complaints to allow former employees to claim their rights.

36. The Centre encouraged national human rights institutions in the subregion to initiate processes that would lead to the adoption of national action plans on business and human rights to increase promotion of human rights and protection against abuses by business actors. In that regard, the Cameroon Human Rights Commission elaborated an internal plan of action on business and human rights following a series of technical support and capacity-building activities delivered by the Centre. The implementation of the action plan will involve various State and non-State actors and is expected to be a pilot for the preparation of the country's national action plan.

## **2. Human rights and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals**

37. During the reporting period, the Centre contributed to the launching of the working group on the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations country team in Cameroon. The Group seeks to provide support to the Government in its efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In that context, the Centre supported the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development by compiling recommendations adopted by international human rights mechanisms in relation to human rights instruments ratified by the country and each Goal. The Centre advised the United Nations country team and the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development on the most vulnerable groups on which to focus, including indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities, in accordance with the principle of leaving no one behind. This support helped the Government in the preparation of its report within the framework of the voluntary national review presented to the high-level political forum on sustainable development on 18 July 2019. The report was developed in consultation with various stakeholders, including technical and financial partners and civil society organizations. It was focused on several Goals, including Goal 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive



societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

38. On account of its limited capacities, the Centre was not able to engage with other countries in the subregion to support their efforts to implement the Goals.

#### **D. Early warning, prevention of violations and protection of human rights in situations of conflict and insecurity**

39. The Centre continued to actively participate in the semi-annual meetings of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa. At the meetings held in N'Djamena and Kinshasa in May 2019, the Centre drew the attention of Member States to the human rights situation in the subregion and called for adequate efforts to prevent violence and insecurity, including measures to avoid social tensions, to enhance the realization of economic, social and cultural rights, to guarantee the right to life and to protect civilians in the context of violent conflicts, including protecting women against sexual violence. The Centre also advocated respect for fundamental freedoms and protection of the rights of marginalized groups as a way to prevent crisis and conflicts. It also continued to advocate the increased cooperation of Member States with the United Nations human rights mechanisms and appealed for more concerted efforts to implement their recommendations.

40. The Centre contributed to the human rights and reconciliation pillar of the Peacebuilding Fund project in the Congo, in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund, UNHCR and UNDP. This included capacity-building activities, held from 17 to 22 September 2018, for police officers, gendarmerie officers and civil society actors on human rights in the Pool department, to raise awareness among 75 key actors in the peacebuilding process on human rights principles in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. All participants are to join in community awareness caravans and support dialogue platforms in the Pool department.

41. In March and April 2018, in Maroua and Kribi, Cameroon, the Centre trained 50 Cameroonian police and gendarmerie officers and military court judges, including 16 women, on human rights in the fight against terrorism, in partnership with the Office of Counter-Terrorism.

42. In April 2019, the Centre organized a seminar for the members and staff of the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms of Cameroon to allow them to contribute to the resolution of the ongoing social and political conflicts. Participants committed themselves to working with stakeholders, including national authorities, to prevent conflicts and to publish reports on the risk of violent conflicts.

43. The Centre started analysing the anti-terrorism law in Cameroon, with a view to advocating its revision, as it has been used to limit the exercise of freedom of movement, opinion and expression, association and peaceful assembly.

#### **E. Increasing implementation of the recommendations of international human rights mechanisms**

##### **1. Ratification of international and regional human rights instruments**

44. During the reporting period, there were fewer ratifications of human rights instruments compared with the previous period. Despite advocacy by the Centre, the

Congo,<sup>7</sup> Equatorial Guinea<sup>8</sup> and Gabon<sup>9</sup> have not ratified any additional human rights instruments.

## 2. Reporting to human rights mechanisms and follow-up to recommendations

45. Cameroon and Gabon continued to make progress in reporting to international and regional human rights mechanisms. For instance, Cameroon submitted its most recent periodic reports to the Human Rights Committee and the Committee against Torture in 2017, and to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2019. Following a training course conducted by the Centre from 5 to 7 December 2018, the interministerial committee in charge of drafting reports to human rights mechanisms in Gabon committed itself to fast-tracking the preparation and submission of outstanding reports to the Human Rights Committee, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee Against Torture and the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

46. In Cameroon, the Centre continued to support the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms in enhancing its contribution to reporting to international human rights mechanisms. In November 2018, in Yaoundé, the Centre organized a training session on reporting to treaty bodies for the commissioners, programme officers and regional secretaries of the Commission, a total of 50 people. The Commission is fully versed in the role of national human rights institutions in the submission of reports and the monitoring of the implementation of recommendations of human rights mechanisms. It adopted a road map for its participation in the preparation of future national reports and the submission of alternative reports.

47. In Cameroon and the Congo, the Centre contributed to programming activities under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, thereby ensuring a human rights-based approach in compliance with United Nations programmatic principles. Government counterparts have been demonstrating increased openness to considering human rights issues in the context of United Nations programming.

48. The Centre regularly updated and shared the recommendations of United Nations and regional human rights mechanisms with relevant government institutions in countries of the subregion. The treaty body capacity-building officer assigned to the Centre has provided support to some governments, including those of the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, on the compilation of recommendations and the preparation of implementation plans.

<sup>7</sup> The Congo has not yet ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty; the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

<sup>8</sup> Equatorial Guinea has yet to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty; the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

<sup>9</sup> Gabon has not yet ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty; the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

49. In Cameroon, the Congo and Gabon, the Centre has consistently engaged with civil society organizations to enhance their advocacy with respect to the implementation of the recommendations of human rights mechanisms. The Centre thus provided advice and technical support to civil society networks to monitor the implementation of recommendations and prepare alternative reports for submission to human rights mechanisms. It also encouraged them to work in synergy, including on thematic focus areas. The Centre provided such support to the Child Rights Network and the Collectif des organisations des droits de l'homme de l'extrême nord in Cameroon, the coalition of organizations of persons with disabilities in Gabon and the platform of human rights organizations in the Congo.

### **3. Cooperation with special procedures**

50. Despite a standing invitation extended by Cameroon in 2014 and continued advocacy by the Centre, no special procedure mandate holders visited Cameroon. However, the Government has accepted the request for a visit by the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material, and has sent an invitation to the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples.

51. The Governments of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe have yet to reply to outstanding requests from special procedures. Gabon has not yet replied to the request of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material, for a visit. The Governments of Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe have yet to respond to the requests for visits by the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

### **4. Universal periodic review**

52. In May 2018, Cameroon participated in the third universal periodic review cycle. Of the 196 recommendations addressed to the Government, it accepted 135. To address the violence affecting the South-West and North-West Regions, the Government promised, inter alia, to guarantee transparency by providing information on the prevailing crisis, to investigate cases of disappearances and to engage in a multipartite dialogue and address the issue of linguistic minorities. The Government also committed itself to taking measures to combat any form of discrimination concerning women and ethnic groups. The country partially accepted 3 recommendations and took note of 58 others.

53. Gabon was reviewed in November 2017 and received 166 recommendations, of which it accepted 143. In particular, the country committed itself to fully implementing the outcome of the 2017 political dialogue, taking measures to ensure transparent and credible legislative elections, respecting the right to freedom of assembly, improving living conditions in prisons and reviewing the extraordinarily long duration of judicial investigations. Gabon also committed itself to combating human trafficking and discrimination against women. The country took note of the 23 other recommendations.

54. The Congo and Equatorial Guinea were reviewed in November 2018 and May 2019, respectively. By the time the present report was finalized, neither Government had communicated its responses on the recommendations.

## **IV. Challenges**

55. Increased insecurity in the subregion, in particular in the Lake Chad Basin and the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon, and the continuously deteriorating situation in Burundi were among the main challenges to the work of the

Centre. In Burundi, the lack of cooperation from the Government remained a concern. In Cameroon, the Centre continued to face constraints in its access to some areas, as well as to persons in detention. However, it is worth noting that, by the time the present report was compiled, cooperation between OHCHR and Cameroon was developing in a positive way, including through the deployment of an OHCHR team to the country on a technical visit as a follow-up action to the High Commissioner's visit in May 2019.

56. The lack of adequate resources further limited the capacity of the Centre to respond to the growing demand for capacity-building from national human rights institutions and civil society organizations.

## V. Conclusion and recommendations

57. **The period under review has been characterized by political, security and human rights challenges in the subregion, further delaying progress in the realization of economic, social and cultural rights and increasing grievances and distrust in governments and institutions.**

58. **Technical support and practical approaches to engaging with governments and other partners produced positive results during the reporting period. Strengthened cooperation with subregional organizations, notably the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, and with other United Nations partners, raised the profile of the Centre and facilitated its work in the subregion. Moreover, the increase in the number of joint activities implemented with the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, the United Nations Development Programme, the International Organization of la Francophonie, the United Nations Population Fund, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other international actors, as well as with national stakeholders in Cameroon, the Congo and Gabon, proved rewarding in terms of impact.**

59. **Recent political crises underscored the need for increased activities for the protection and promotion of human rights and early warning and rapid responses, including in the context of elections and political processes. In the final quarter of 2019 and in 2020, presidential, legislative and local elections will be held in several countries of the subregion. In that context, continuous and constructive engagement with governments, national institutions, civil society organizations and the media will remain key to the efforts of the Centre to promote the advancement of human rights and democracy in the subregion, in partnership with other United Nations system entities, with a focus on prevention.**

60. **I encourage all governments of the subregion to intensify their engagement with United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the treaty bodies, the universal periodic review and the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, to deliver on their human rights obligations.**

61. **I welcome the visit of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to Cameroon in May 2019 and encourage the Government of Cameroon to implement the commitments that it made on that occasion and as a member of the Human Rights Council.**

62. **In view of the many significant human rights challenges in the subregion and the growing demands made by governments and other partners for the support of the Centre, I reiterate my previous appeal to Member States to consider increasing their contributions to the Centre.**