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TEXTS ADOPTED

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**P9\_TA(2021)0483**

**The human rights situation in Cameroon**

**European Parliament resolution of 25 November 2021 on the human rights situation in Cameroon (2021/2983(RSP))**

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to its previous resolutions on Cameroon, in particular that of 18 April 2019<sup>1</sup>,
  - having regard to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Cameroon Situation Report of 5 November 2021 and the EU annual report on human rights and democracy in the world 2020 – Country report: Cameroon of 21 June 2021,
  - having regard to the ACP-EU Partnership Agreement (‘Cotonou Agreement’),
  - having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,
  - having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966,
  - having regard to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Cameroon ratified in 1993,
  - having regard to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights of 1981,
  - having regard to the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon,
  - having regard to Rules 144(5) and 132(4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas the initially peaceful protests promoted by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium against the federal government’s marginalisation of Cameroon’s Anglophone regions in 2016 were suppressed with extreme violence by the state authorities, thereby fuelling support for separatism and the emergence of several separatist militias calling for a new state, Ambazonia, and prompting a bloody military conflict;

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 158, 30.4.2021, p. 7.

- B. whereas dialogue is a precondition for peace, and President Paul Biya's government has consistently rejected direct talks with any separatist leaders from the Anglophone regions;
- C. whereas Cameroon faces a number of simultaneous political and security challenges, including threats from Boko Haram in its Far North region and an internal armed separatist rebellion which has been ongoing for almost 5 years in its Anglophone North West and South West regions;
- D. whereas Anglophone teachers and lawyers held peaceful strikes and demonstrations in 2016 in the North West and South West regions in opposition to the imposition of the French legal system and language in their courts and classrooms, which triggered the crisis; whereas the armed conflict, ongoing since 2017, has killed thousands of people and led to a full-blown humanitarian crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone regions;
- E. whereas to date, more than 3 000 civilians and hundreds of members of the security forces have lost their lives; whereas the ongoing conflict in Cameroon has internally displaced over 1 million people; whereas over 2,2 million people require humanitarian assistance and over 66 000 people have sought refuge in neighbouring Nigeria; whereas Cameroon hosts more than 447 000 refugees and asylum seekers; whereas the spillover of this crisis is affecting the Cameroon West and Littoral regions;
- F. whereas the rule of law is not being upheld by the state of Cameroon, with independent monitors, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, having previously documented military trial proceedings marred by serious substantive and procedural defects, and in which the presumption of innocence, the right to adequate defence, and the independence of proceedings and of the judiciary in general are all seriously undermined;
- G. whereas clashes between Anglophone separatist armed groups and government security forces are increasing in frequency and severity; whereas humanitarian aid has also been heavily disrupted in the affected regions due to non-state armed groups and lockdown measures, leaving people in those regions severely food insecure and depriving tens of thousands of people of access to vital healthcare; whereas few exceptions to the lockdown measures were granted on humanitarian grounds and, as a result, aid disbursement was significantly disrupted; whereas UN agencies have been forced to suspend humanitarian activities, notwithstanding the additional vulnerabilities created by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- H. whereas civilians are bearing the brunt of the violence and conflict between government and separatist forces and make up the vast majority of casualties; whereas government and separatist forces alike are continuously perpetrating reprisal attacks against one another, intentionally targeting civilians and vulnerable parts of the population;
- I. whereas Felix Agbor Nkongho, a human rights lawyer, prominent defender of the rights of the Anglophone minority and advocate for the peaceful resolution of the crisis, has on more than one occasion received death threats from the armed separatist groups; whereas he is not the only person facing attacks and harassment;

- J. whereas, since the 2018 elections, political tensions have spiralled into hate speech on the grounds of ethnicity or political opinion which, in turn, is amplified via social media platforms;
- K. whereas government forces have carried out extrajudicial killings of civilians, including women and children, torture and ill-treatment, committed sexual violence, including rape, and gender-based violence, destroyed property, including villages, homes, health facilities and hospitals, looted property, and arrested and detained citizens arbitrarily, all as a result of hostilities or presumed collaboration with separatists;
- L. whereas in the first five months of 2021, armed separatists carried out at least 27 attacks with improvised explosive devices in 13 towns, more than in all previous years of the crisis combined; whereas they have raped, killed, tortured, violently assaulted, threatened and kidnapped hundreds of people, including women, humanitarian workers, teachers and children, presumed to have been collaborating with the military;
- M. whereas the conflict has had a disproportionate impact on children, with 700 000 students having been deprived of their right to education due to a forced school boycott across the Anglophone regions; whereas, as of August 2021, children in Cameroon make up 28 % of all survivors of gender-based violence and face a heightened risk of child recruitment, child labour and child abuse, with over 50 % of children in the country having reportedly been abused; whereas, according to the UN Population Fund, 38 % of women in Cameroon aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18 and 13 % were married before the age of 15;
- N. whereas President Biya, in response to international pressure, established a commission of inquiry into the killings in Ngarbuh, following which the government admitted that its security forces bear some responsibility and announced the arrest of individuals involved; whereas, however, there is no further information available on the matter;
- O. whereas a lockdown was strictly enforced, including the closure of almost all schools and learning centres; whereas violence was perpetrated against individuals refusing to observe the lockdown, including children and teachers; whereas schools, universities, and hospitals were attacked, thereby aggravating and prolonging violations of the right to access education and leading to the deprivation of essential health services;
- P. whereas tensions have risen in the country since the presidential elections of 2018; whereas, in September 2019, President Biya organised a national dialogue with the intention of resolving the conflict between armed forces and separatist rebels in the Anglophone regions; whereas two years later the implementation of the measures has yielded few results; whereas various attempts in 2020 and 2021 to resolve the crisis in Cameroon have failed;
- Q. whereas the signature of the presidential decrees providing for the transfer of competences and the gradual transfer of human and financial resources to the decentralised authorities for the concrete implementation of the decentralisation process is pending;
- R. whereas the government continues to restrict the freedoms of expression and association and has become increasingly intolerant of political dissent; whereas hundreds of opposition party members and supporters were arrested following demonstrations

calling for a peaceful solution to the crisis in the Anglophone regions; whereas restrictions are persistently placed on political opponents, protestors, journalists and civil society;

- S. whereas Cameroon's penal code punishes sexual relations between persons of the same sex with up to five years' imprisonment; whereas numerous cases of arrest and harassment of LGBTQI people have been reported in recent years and months;
- T. whereas Cameroon faces additional threats from Boko Haram and Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Far North region; whereas attacks by the Islamist armed group Boko Haram have included daily killings, kidnappings, robberies and the destruction of property, which amount to serious human rights abuses and violations of international law and international humanitarian law; whereas such attacks have also involved child suicide bombers and child soldiers; whereas, since December 2020, at least 80 civilians have been killed by Boko Haram, with over 340 000 people being internally displaced as of August 2021; whereas the presumed death of Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram, in a confrontation in Nigeria with the ISWAP splinter faction helped consolidate ISWAP's power and increased insecurity in Cameroon's Far North region; whereas government forces are unable to effectively protect the affected population;
1. Is deeply concerned about the human rights situation in Cameroon; underlines the right of citizens to freedom of expression, assembly and association; calls for the respect of human rights and urges the Government of Cameroon to take all steps necessary to uphold its obligations to protect these rights;
  2. Urges both the Government of Cameroon and the political and military leaders of separatist groups to agree on a humanitarian ceasefire and encourages the parties to the conflict to agree on confidence-building measures, such as the freeing of non-violent political prisoners and the lifting of school boycotts; urges President Biya's government and the Anglophone separatists to immediately re-initiate peace talks; urges the international community, especially the African Union, Central African states and the EU, to help facilitate dialogue by offering to take on a mediation role; underlines the importance of regional collaboration and urges the government to work closely with the African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States; deplores the failure and unwillingness of both parties to the conflict to engage in truly meaningful peace talks to solve the conflict; is convinced that political dialogue, conducted in a spirit of compromise, effective political participation and inclusion, including that of all relevant stakeholders, is the only way forward to reach lasting peace; calls on both the Government of Cameroon and leaders of separatist groups to make use of the existing mediation offers provided by third parties for immediate and direct negotiations;
  3. Condemns the human rights abuses and violations of international law and international humanitarian law perpetrated by the parties to the armed conflict and underlines the importance of the fight against impunity; calls on the Cameroonian authorities to ensure independent, effective, transparent and impartial investigations, as well as prosecution of the serious violations and abuses by both state and non-state actors, in accordance with international law and standards, and calls for those responsible for human rights violations to be held accountable and brought to justice in a fair trial, in order to end impunity and ensure judicial independence, which are core components of the rule of law and the foundation of a functioning democratic state;

4. Calls on the Government of Cameroon to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; urges the EU to use all of the political leverage provided by its development aid and other bilateral programmes to enhance the defence of human rights in Cameroon;
5. Opposes the use of military courts for the trial of civilians; recalls the international obligations as regards a fair trial, by which Cameroon is bound, reminds Cameroon of its obligation to uphold the right of all citizens to a fair trial before independent courts of law, and recalls that military courts should not have jurisdiction over the civilian population;
6. Calls on the Cameroonian authorities to stop bringing people to trial before military tribunals, with predetermined outcomes and the imposition of the death penalty, which is unlawful under international human rights law; recalls that the death penalty has not been used in Cameroon since 1997, a milestone in the country's path towards full abolition; reiterates the EU's opposition to the death penalty in all cases and without exception; calls on the Government of Cameroon to ensure that it will be abolished; calls on the Government of Cameroon to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the abolition of the death penalty; urges the courts to refrain from issuing such sentences and to confirm that it will not seek the death penalty;
7. Deplores the use of violence, in particular against children, and is particularly concerned about the impact of the crisis on children; calls on both sides to the conflict to cease intentionally targeting civilians and urges separatists to immediately cease attacks against schools and end, with immediate effect, all forced boycotts on education, allowing for the safe return to school of all students and teachers;
8. Calls on the Cameroonian authorities to protect all women in the country, especially in the conflict areas, and to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through boosting the participation of women and women's rights organisations in public and political life; calls for the development of specific EU actions to strengthen the rights of different groups of women, with a special focus on young people, migrants, women living with HIV, LGBTIQI people and people with disabilities;
9. Believes that the decentralisation process, seen as a system of economic, social and political governance, is a key instrument to respond to the multiple development challenges, notably through the enhanced accountability of local politicians and local administrations vis-à-vis engaged citizens; welcomes the EU's support for the process;
10. Condemns the excessive use and abuse of force against political opponents and peaceful protestors; deplores the use of lockdown measures, such as curfews or the banning of public meetings, under the veil of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to constrain freedom of expression, the press and the right to peaceful assembly; expresses concern at the status of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in Cameroon; deplores the arbitrary arrest and harassment of journalists and opposition politicians and the silencing of political dissent; calls on the Cameroonian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release political opponents, protestors and all other citizens who have been arbitrarily arrested and detained solely for political purposes; condemns the violations of fundamental freedoms;

11. Calls on social media platforms to work with the government, the opposition and civil society to ensure that their pages are verified and limit inflammatory content, hate speech and misinformation, which further break down intercommunal relations;
12. Deplores the fact that over 40 000 people were denied food assistance due to insecurity and roadblocks in the North West and the South West regions, as well as the recent attacks on health facilities and health workers, and the fact that humanitarian activities were banned under lockdown; condemns the blockage of humanitarian aid and attacks against humanitarian workers, including their abduction, harassment and murder in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon, and condemns, equally, the escalating intimidation of independent monitors and human rights defenders, especially women's rights defenders, whose work is more important than ever in the context of serious human rights violations by all parties to the conflict; insists that all parties to the conflict immediately provide unfettered humanitarian access; calls on the Government of Cameroon to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the regions in crisis;
13. Calls for the UN and the EU to continue monitoring the humanitarian situation and assessing needs; calls for urgent humanitarian support from the international community, including the EU and its Member States, to respond effectively and meet the urgent needs of the population accordingly; considers that a UN Human Rights Council fact-finding mission to Cameroon would be appropriate to determine the degree to which international human rights law and international humanitarian law have been violated and by whom;
14. Condemns the terrorist actions by Boko Haram in Cameroon; acknowledges the efforts of the Cameroonian authorities in combating the group; calls on the international community to support all efforts to combat the Islamist armed group; insists that terrorism can only be fought efficiently if we address the causes and specific problems related to inequality;
15. Instructs its President to forward this Resolution to the Commission, the Council, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Government and Parliament of Cameroon, and the co-presidents of the ACP-EU Joint Assembly.