



Cameroon Human Rights Commission  
Commission des Droits de l'homme du Cameroun

## **SUB-REGIONAL WORKSHOP ON STRENGTHENING AND ESTABLISHING NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS (NHRI)**

**Adamaoua Grand Hotel (Douala), 14-16 December 2022**

### **Speech by the Chairperson of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission**

The Director of the UN Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa (UNCHRD-CA), a constant partner of the National Human Rights Institution of Cameroon, who is represented here, and whom I would like to thank most warmly for honouring me by co-sponsoring this important meeting,

The Governor of the Littoral Region, here represented,

The Representative of the Section for Human Rights Institutions and Regional Mechanisms of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva,

The Senior Human Rights Adviser of the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Burundi,

The Chairperson of the Independent National Human Rights Commission of Burundi, dear counterpart,

Distinguished representatives of the National Human Rights Institutions of the Central African sub-region,

Distinguished representatives of the public administrations of Cameroon's neighbouring countries, to which our country is united by an exemplary friendship and deep feelings of brotherhood,

Distinguished Commissioners, Members of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission,

Distinguished guests, all protocols observed (even if distinctions do not always correspond to those to which your competence, courage and generosity entitle you),

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At this solemn moment, it is with a mixed feeling of joy and gratitude that I take the floor in this sumptuous Conference Room of the Adamaoua Grand Hotel, in this great city of Douala where my roots are, on behalf of the National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) of Cameroon, as part of the sub-regional workshop on the strengthening and establishing of NHRIs. We are here to discuss how together we can strengthen the NHRIs of the Central African sub-region, so that they can fully play their role in promoting and protecting human rights, thus contributing to the realization of the dreams of coexistence, harmony and progress of the peoples of our respective countries.

This meeting takes place at a time when NHRIs in general continue to face multiple challenges related to their existence and functioning. The UN General Assembly resolution of 20 December 1993 recommends that States create national institutions whose main missions will be to implement policies for the promotion and protection of human rights and guide public authorities in the field of human rights, for the entrenchment of democracy and the rule of law.

At the regional level, Article 26 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights also prescribes the “*establishment and improvement*” of national and local human rights institutions in African

countries. These national institutions must operate according to guiding principles commonly known as the Paris Principles.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action solemnly adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights held on 14-25 June 1993 encourages, in point 86 of the document, the National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights to “*periodically hold meetings under the auspices of the Centre for Human Rights to examine ways of improving their mechanisms and sharing their experiences.*”

You will agree with me that the deliberations of this sub-regional workshop, which will last three days, contribute to the concrete realization of this vital roadmap on international cooperation and solidarity in the field of Human Rights.

Permit me to try again to express my gratitude – to which I associate the compliments supported by the Commissioners and the Permanent Secretariat of the CHRC – to the UN Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa (UNCHRD-CA), Office of the High-Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) of our sub-region, for the rewarding choice of Cameroon, which has the honour of hosting this important meeting, after the one in Libreville, in Gabon, where I had the privilege of participating from 10 to 12 November 2021.

I have no doubt that the United Nations Centre, a valuable and indispensable partner of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC) within the United Nations system, made this choice because of the legendary hospitality that unquestionably characterizes our beloved and beautiful country Cameroon, also called “the Continent”,

a designation amplified since the victory of the Indomitable Lions, its national football team, against Brazil at the World Cup taking place in Qatar right now. For those of you who are new to our country, I hope you have already experienced that. In any case, I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you in the economic capital of Cameroon. I am certain that you will return to your respective countries, with a parade of joyful and exquisite memories.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Participants,

A study, jointly conducted in 2015 by the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions (NANHRI) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) on the state of national human rights institutions in Africa, recommended strengthening NHRIs to support government and development partner initiatives.

This study focused on several areas, including independence, surveillance, finance and collaboration with other stakeholders and the fulfilment of their mandate to promote and protect human rights. Some of the recommendations of the study are addressed to the NHRIs themselves, NANHRI, governments, and development partners.

This sub-regional workshop aims to ensure that this vision supports NHRIs, thus enabling them to better contribute to the sustainable development of our sub-region.

The relevance of this meeting, which is being held a year after the one in Libreville, where the Strengthening and Establishment of

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) were discussed under international standards, there is also a need to follow up on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the roadmaps that were drawn up at that time, especially concerning support for the process of effective establishment of NHRIs in countries of the sub-region that do not yet have them, as well as the continuation of reforms initiated by those that have not yet attained the A status.

In addition, this meeting takes place a year before the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Principles governing the functioning of national human rights institutions. Indeed, it would be interesting for NHRIs to assess compliance with the Paris Principles by 20 December 2023.

In these perspectives, I am pleased with the opportunity to resume these rich and high-level discussions with you on the added value of our unique institutions in the human rights landscape, and the need to adopt ingenious and effective strategies to strengthen our presence, our independence and our actions with all the actors with whom we interact as part of promoting and defending human rights.

These strategic discussions are particularly relevant to the role of human rights in the triumph of the rule of law in our sub-region. They are also important given that our institutions and the work they carry out are an indicator of good governance, democracy, peace and development. As Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, a French philosopher and scholar, said very well, *“Democracy worthy of its name can only guarantee human rights through the effective existence of institutional mediation”*.

Very recently, for example, the public authorities, through the Ministry of External Relations, demonstrated this by asking for a contribution from the CHRC to strengthen the commitment of the United States and Cameroon to support the promotion of democracy, responsible governance and human rights as part of preparing Cameroon's participation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> United States/Africa Leaders' Summit which has been going on since yesterday in Washington, in which His Excellency Paul Biya, President of the Republic of Cameroon is participating in person.

However, there is more: human rights are indeed a central issue and will increasingly occupy a primordial place in international relations, since the respect for human rights conditions will further condition inter-state cooperation with certain countries in several areas, including the most sensitive ones, as much as the movement of goods and persons at the international level, with the rise in the subject "Business and Human Rights".

By setting up the CHRC through a profound transformation of the enabling law of the NHRI of Cameroon, and then the swearing-in of its members before the Supreme Court sitting in Chambers on 29 April 2021, the State of Cameroon clearly understood that democracy cannot be brought into the daily life of the inhabitants of a country without the entrenchment of a culture of human and people's rights, through the effective functioning of the mechanisms and institutions which are its vectors and which assume the defence thereof.

This demonstrates the essential role of our institutions in the human rights movement in Africa and around the world. This role was

again recognized at the 51<sup>st</sup> session of the Human Rights Council held from 12 September to 7 October 2022 in Geneva, through the Resolution of 13 October 2022, in which the Council welcomes the valuable contribution made by NHRIs in fulfilling the mandates of regional and international human rights mechanisms, including that of the Universal Periodic Review and United Nations Special Procedures.

NHRIs are state institutions that promote accountability, prevent human rights violations and support the development and implementation of non-discriminatory laws, policies and programmes. They are also a bridge between the State and civil society, as conveners in consultations on national processes that affect marginalized and vulnerable groups, to promote transparent, participatory and inclusive national development processes. At the national level, NHRIs have a mandate to put an end to abuses – not just to "document" them in the manner of CSOs/NGOs. They inform and monitor the impact of policies and actions on the enjoyment of human rights. They also play an important role in advising governments and parliaments on human rights. In this respect, NHRIs are the cornerstone of national, regional and international systems for the promotion and protection of human rights.

It is also clear to you that NHRIs are expected on several fronts: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Civil and Political Rights, Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Vulnerable Groups, as well as the consideration of human rights in the treatment of special issues such as climate change, migration, pandemic management, the fight against terrorism, the prevention of conflicts of various kinds, the fight

against corruption, due diligence in corporate activities, achieving the objectives of Agenda 2063 and 2030 on sustainable development, etc.

To meet all these expectations, we have the necessary assets offered by the Paris Principles and by our enabling laws, as well as the tools developed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Global Alliance of NHRIs (GANHRI) and the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions (NANHRI). Among these tools:

- I will first of all mention the Belgrade Principles adopted on 23 February 2012, which determine relations between NHRIs and parliaments, to strengthen and better establish effective cooperation as required by the Paris Principles
- I will then mention the Mérida Declaration adopted on 10 October 2015 on the role of NHRIs in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals
- I will conclude this illustrative, not exhaustive list by the Declaration (of Marrakech) on the widening of the civic space, the promotion and protection of human rights defenders, with a specific focus on women: the role of national human rights institutions, adopted on 12 October 2018.

However, we are all aware that the density and nobility of the NHRIs mandate do not spare them where they exist, with the many challenges they encounter. One of the major challenges they face is the lack of awareness of their mandate, which usually leads to non-advantageous relationships with other actors, including governments



in some countries – fortunately, not Cameroon – that often want to control their agendas and positions under the pretext that they hold the paternity of these institutions, in disregard of the principle of independence, which is central and important for their effectiveness.

With regards to CSOs, some develop bad competition – and frankly, unfair opposition – vis-à-vis NHRIs, by wrongly presenting them and for the needs of the cause, as branches of government. Ignorance of the nature of NHRIs and their methods, where confrontation with public authorities is contraindicated, also pushes some CSOs – fortunately very few, although noisy – to blame NHRIs for not being as offensive as they are, even in their actions to protect human rights. Fortunately, the facts and operational results of NHRIs in terms of success stories, activities and impact fully demonstrate the opposite.

Despite the often-indisputable goodwill of public authorities, in our underdeveloped countries characterized by scarcity of resources, several NHRIs also face a lack of financial and human resources.

### **Distinguished representatives of public authorities,**

Where NHRIs are being set up or engaged in a reform process, the authorities are often tempted to create them only to reverse their image at the international level and to diminish the criticism of international NGOs on human rights issues. It is up to you to protect these new institutions from the lack of concern for the people they must protect against human rights violations, by allowing them to reach out to the people, as close as possible to them, as the CHRC has done;

- i) by massively using social media to disseminate its statement to mark African and Universal Human Rights Days,
- ii) by leaving the capital to organize Human Rights Days in different regions of the country, including outside the regional capitals, or
- iii) by obtaining from one of Cameroon's largest mobile phone companies, Orange Cameroon, for it to disseminate a push message on its toll-free number, 1523, to all its subscribers by SMS, in French and English.

It is also desirable that you plead with the competent authorities, knocking on all the doors so that your NHRIs are equipped with sufficient resources and meet all the requirements of compliance with the Paris Principles. Your contribution to the establishment of these entities must be made bearing in mind the accreditation processes that take place before the GANHRI, a process whose smooth functioning benefits our communities, our States, the Central African sub-region, the Francophonie and the NHRIs themselves.

I cherish the strong determination that the number of NHRIs (8/10) and status A NHRIs (4/10) will increase exponentially within our sub-region<sup>1</sup>. We'll all be honoured.

### Dear NHRI Counterparts and Representatives,

It is incumbent upon us to carry out and support the advocacy for the establishment of NHRIs and the completion of the NHRIs

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<sup>1</sup> According to the breakdown of the scope of intervention of UNCHR-CA which takes into account all the member countries of the Economic Community of Central African States except for Angola.

reform processes in the countries concerned, namely: Congo Brazzaville, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, and the Central African Republic. It is not a soft plea, of form or without conviction, but a committed and concerted approach that will lead us to intervene with national and regional actors who can effectively encourage the establishment of NHRIs and their commitment to the accreditation process to the status of compliance with the Paris Principles. When these NHRIs are established, they will not only have to meet the Paris Principles but will also have to be maintained.

Our role as a locomotive in this process must be exemplary, characterised by achievements in the interest of rights holders who will no longer have difficulty turning to us for effective remedies to remedy human rights violations. This role must also take on board the Paris Principles, which especially recommend a close liaison with CSOs, to help duty bearers effectively fulfil their sovereign mission of protecting human rights, in the most sustainable manner possible.

In this sense, one of the opportunities we can seize is the preparation of electoral deadlines in several countries of the sub-region. At least five out of the ten countries served by the Centre are affected by elections next year and for the next five years. This is a good opportunity to ensure respect for human rights during the pre-election phase, during the electoral phase itself and the post-election period. Our deployment on this ground will certainly help prevent electoral violence and preserve peace. With this in mind, the CHRC has compiled an updated compendium of its recommendations addressed to the main actors of the electoral system during the 2010-2020 decade and send them to those entitled on 12 December 2022. This

compendium has just been posted on the website and the CHRC Facebook and Twitter pages. Our deliberations today will certainly enable us to discuss these experiences in greater detail.

Several intentions have been expressed here and there, including by representatives of the United Nations, we need to look more seriously at the establishment of an NHRI network in Central Africa to develop fruitful synergies to better fulfil our mandate, to be champions in all areas of Human Rights compared to other sub-regions, and even beyond Africa's borders. In this perspective, our meetings will become annual or biannual meetings and the echo of our performances and our growing progress as an NHRI will resonate regionally and universally, especially during the activities of GANHRI, NANHRI, AFCNDH, the Commonwealth Forum of NHRI, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Committee of Experts on Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the African Court.

**Dear Partners of the United Nations System,**

NHRIs can only be grateful for the support they receive from you. The CHRC has always shown you the full extent of its gratitude and sympathy for your unconditional support in its functioning.

However, it would be incorrect not to tell you that the support we receive is still insufficient, at least, compared to what is done in the other sub-regions of Africa and proportion to the challenges facing NHRIs in Central Africa. We hope to work more closely and benefit from more substantial technical and financial support for the implementation of NHRI projects and action plans, including ensuring

their adequate participation in meetings of African and universal human rights treaty bodies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Guests,

Our proceedings deserve to be rewarded by striking progress, which is why I wish us every success, renewing my wishes to those who come from far away for a pleasant stay in this land of hospitality.

Long live Human Rights!

Long live the NHRIs!

Long live one and indivisible Cameroon!