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DE L'HOMME DU CAMEROUN

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CAMEROON HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSION

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STATEMENT OF THE CAMEROON HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION TO
MARK THE 7th AFRICA CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS
DAY

Universal theme. – *Strengthening the linkage of civil registration and vital statistics to legal identity systems through digitalisation for enhanced inclusion*

10 August 2024

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC), hereinafter referred to as “The Commission” established by law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019 and rendered operational on 29 April 2021, following the swearing in of its members before the Supreme Court sitting in Joint Benches,

Bearing in mind that in July 2016, Heads of States and Government declared 2017-2026 to be the “Decade for repositioning civil registration and vital statistics in Africa’s continental, regional and national development agendas”¹,

Bearing in mind also the African Union Commission, meeting under its Fourth Conference of Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration from 7 to 8 December 2017 in Nouakchott, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, at the end of this Conference recommends to member States that “August 10 should be declared Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day, and calls upon [these States] to observe the day”²,

¹ See Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative, “Nouakchott statement following the Fourth Conference of Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics”, 4 pp., spec. p. 1, <https://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Nouakchott-Declaration-CRVS-Dec2017-English.pdf>, accessed on 6 August 2024.

² *Ibid*, p. 1.

Emphasising that the celebration of Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day marks a pivotal moment for reflection, collaboration and action towards strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems across Africa, especially as the continent strives to accelerate progress in meeting the commitments made under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to achieving universal legal identity³,

Noting that the issue of civil status or personal identity registration has never been this considered in national and international public policies as it has been in the last 15 years, including the United Nations General Assembly, which adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015

placed birth registration firmly on the international development agenda [particularly under Goal 16] namely, to provide legal identity for all, including [the registration of all civil status events by 2030 and] support in building the statistical capacity [of States] needed for strong national civil registration systems⁴,

Bearing in mind that the adoption of Indicator 16.9.1 of SDG 16 according to which *Birth registration should be the primary means for the granting of legal identity, and civil registration remains the reference norm for maintaining legal identity*⁵,

Aware that, “*when given to a citizen, legal identity [is his or her proof of existence in the legal sense of the term, written] in a national civil status register with civil status facts relating to that person throughout his or her life*”⁶,

Stressing also that:

digitization and advances in technology have been essential to the integration of civil registration and identity management systems and have contributed to more effective authentication, deduplication and data sharing across government systems⁷,

Highlighting that during the sixth Africa civil registration and vital statistics day celebrated on 10 August 2023, *issues over the opportunity to increase national coverage and improve data quality and timeliness through the digitisation of civil status events registration systems*, were already at the heart of the debates,

³ See United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, "Africa civil status registration and vital statistics day", <https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/en/stories/journee-africaine-de-lenregistrement-des-faits-detat-civil-et-statistiques-de-letat-civil>, accessed on 31 July 2024.

⁴ See United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "A statistical update on birth registration in Africa", 32 pp. spec. p.5, [file:///C:/Users/PC/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/Africa-Birth-Registration-Brochure-Oct-2022_EN%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/PC/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/Africa-Birth-Registration-Brochure-Oct-2022_EN%20(1).pdf), accessed on 7 August 2024.

⁵ See Fifth Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, *Civil registration statistics and their relevance to the monitoring of Agenda 2063*, Lusaka, 14-18 October 2019, p. 3. , 18 pp., spec. p. 3, <https://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/48415/b12004327.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, accessed on 7 August 2024.

⁶ See Wikipedia "*Identité juridique numérique*", https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identit%C3%A9_juridique_num%C3%A9rique#:~:text=Attribu%C3%A9e%20%C3%A0%20un%20citoyen%2C%20l'identit%C3%A9_juridique%20est%20sa_sont%20relatifs%20tout%20au%20long%20de%20sa%20vie, accessed on 2 August 2024.

⁷ See Fifth Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration Lusaka, 14-18 October 2019, 18 pp, specifically p.8, <https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/com/2021/E2001007-English-Report%20of%20the%20Fifth%20Conference%20of%20Ministers%20Responsible%20for%20Civil%20Registration.pdf>, accessed on 6 August 2024.

Noting also that this year Cameroon joins the other African countries to celebrate this seventh Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day under the theme ***Strengthening the linkage of civil registration and vital statistics to legal identity systems through digitalisation for enhanced inclusion***. The relevance and topicality of this theme is greatly justified by “*the pivotal role of digital integration in harmonizing civil registration and vital statistics systems with legal identity structures*”⁸, which contributes to the inclusion of all social strata in sustainable development,

Noting that the Minister of Decentralisation and Local Development (MINDDEVEL) announced the theme of the Day in Cameroon on 2 August 2024 during a press conference held in Yaoundé, during which he stressed that:

digitalisation coincides with the reforms that the State has been carrying out in this sector since 2009 [as part of] the modernisation of the national civil status system, which is based on the digitalisation of data, [which promotes] the security and simplification of procedures and methods, [as well as] the establishment of essential links between civil status and the entire legal identity system, significantly reducing the opportunities for fraud⁹,

Emphasising that strengthening the links between civil status registration, civil status statistics and legal identity systems will, in particular:

- ensure that citizens benefit from official recognition of their identity and related documents, enabling them to exercise their rights, access social services, participate in economic activities and enforce their legal claims
- ensure integrated systems with robust verification mechanisms and effectively combat identity fraud, identity theft and other forms of identity related crime
- provide more efficient and targeted services in various sectors such as education, health, social protection and electoral processes
- facilitate the recognition and control of identity documents at borders
- identify disparities, develop concrete sectoral policies more effectively and monitor progress¹⁰,

Recalling the words of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission during the celebration of the first Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day:

[t]he continent cannot fulfil its dream of achieving Agenda 2063 [...], unless we know who we are, how many we are, where we live, work and what we need to

⁸ See UNECA, "African Civil Registration Day and Civil Status Statistics 2024", <https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/en/africa-civil-registration-and-vital-statistics-day-2024>, accessed on 2 August 2024.

⁹ See *Cameroon Web*, "Faits d'état civil : la digitalisation en marche", *Infos Business du 6 août 2024*, <https://www.camerounweb.com/CameroonHomePage/business/Faits-d-tat-civil-la-digitalisation-en-marche-768007>, accessed on 7 August 2024.

¹⁰ See UNECA, "Africa civil registration and vital statistics day », <https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/en/stories/journee-africaine-de-lenregistrement-des-faits-detat-civil-et-statistiques-de-letat-civil>, accessed on 7 August 2024.

improve our living conditions. This requires that every vital event is registered and related statistics collected, compiled, produced and disseminated in a regular and consistent manner, to guide policy and planning, inform decision-making [authorities] and track progress to ensure transparency and mutual accountability towards achieving Africa's development agenda¹¹,

Considering that the civil registration system in Cameroon is semi-decentralised¹², with information collected, stored, and transferred between several registers maintained by different bodies¹³, it is crucial to ensure its proper functioning throughout the national territory. This will make it a real catalyst for social, economic, and political development,

Considering further that the people of Cameroon, in the preamble to the Constitution of 18 January 1996, and in various legal instruments for the promotion and protection of human rights duly ratified or otherwise acceded to by Cameroon¹⁴, reaffirm the right of everyone subject to their jurisdiction to preserve his or her identity. These provisions are set out in the CHRC previous statement on the subject¹⁵,

The Commission acknowledges Government efforts to modernise the national civil status registration system in Cameroon, in particular:

- presidential Decree No. 2024/333 of 24 July 2024 relating to Cameroon's accession to the United Nations Conventions relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and on the Reduction of Statelessness, adopted in New York, United States, on 28 September 1954 and 30 August 1961, respectively
- the choice of the national theme for the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples: *Civil status registration, a lever for social inclusion and sustainable development in Cameroon*

¹¹ See African Union (AU), Statement by the Chairperson of the AU Commission during the celebration of the first Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Day, Addis Abeba, 2018, p.1.

¹² See Centre of Excellence for CRVS (Civil Registrations and Vital Statistics) systems, in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), Snapshot of civil registration and vital statistics systems of Cameroon, Ottawa, Canada, 2019, p.5
https://systemesec.ca/sites/default/files/assets/files/CRVS_Cameroon_f_WEB.pdf, accessed on 6 August 2024.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁴ See Articles 6 and 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Articles 25 and 27 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), Articles 25 and 27 of the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954), Articles 1 to 4 of the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (1961), article 5 (d) iii of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), Article 24 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Article 15 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), Articles 7 and 8 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

¹⁵ See CHRC, "Statement by the Cameroon Human Rights Commission to mark the 6th Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day on 10 August 2023", 9 pp., spec. pp. 4-5,
<https://www.cdhc.cm/admin/fichiers/Declarations2023-08-1013-29-13.pdf>, accessed on 6 August 2024.

- the holding of the first *National Forum of Mayors on Universal Birth Registration* in Yaoundé from 26 to 27 April 2024. This Forum was organised by the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development (*MINDDDEVEL*) with the support of technical and financial partners – National Civil Status Registration Office (*BUNEC*) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The aim was to further raise awareness among the concerned stakeholders of the need to significantly reduce the number of people without birth certificates, estimated at 7,000,000 including 1,500,000 children in primary and nursery schools¹⁶

The Commission is gratified by its participation in the activities organised by partners, to remedy the problem of persons without birth certificates, in Yaoundé and out of the capital city, including:

- the CHRC participation at the 4th Strategic Steering Committee for *Promoting Economic and Social Participation of Internally Displaced Persons and Host Population (PESoP)*. This session, was jointly organised by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)* and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bafoussam on 29 - 30 July 2024. One of the conclusions of this session called upon relevant stakeholders to “include the production of civil status documents for IDPs in the ongoing project activities”
- the CHRC in collaboration with the CSO *Afrik’Art Titude* participated in the International Youth Convention for the development of regions. This convention, which took place in Foumban (Noun Division, West Region), from 11 to 14 April 2024 focused on raising awareness among population, especially young people and internally displaced persons of the abovementioned Division, of *the importance of obtaining civil status documents*. During the event, some 200 IDPs, including indigenous *Mbororos*, who did not have civil registration documents were registered,

The Commission commends the efforts of development partners, in particular:

- the launch of the civil registration project in Cameroon by the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)* on 19 July 2024 in Maroua (Far North Region)¹⁷
- the issuing of 507 reconstructed birth certificates by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) on 24 April 2024, including 400 for IDPs and 107 for vulnerable populations in Bertoua¹⁸

¹⁶ See *Cameroon tribune*, “Birth Certificates: 7 million persons not registered”, <https://www.cameroon-tribune.cm/article.html/64544/fr.html/actes-de-naissance-7-millions-de-personnes-nonofficiels>, accessed on 30 July 2024.

¹⁷ See OIF, « *Lancement du projet état civil au Cameroun* », <https://www.francophonie.org/lancement-du-projet-etat-civil-au-cameroun>, accessed on 30 July 2024.

¹⁸ See *Reliefweb*, “*Identité légale : 1340 actes de naissances et cartes nationales d’identité pour les personnes déplacées internes et les populations vulnérables*”, <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/identite-legale-1340-actes-de-naissances-et-cartes-nationales-didentite-pour-les-personnes-deplacees-interne-et-les-populations-vulnerables>, accessed on 29 July 2024.

- the continuation of the *Legal Identity* Project initiated in Cameroun since 31 December 2020 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with financial and technical support from the Government of Japan and the National Civil Status Registration Office (*BUNEC*) respectively, aimed at building the capacity of the State to maintain comprehensive civil status events registration systems, vital statistics, and identity management systems. The project also aimed at developing a comprehensive international normative and policy framework for the registration of civil status events, vital statistics, and identity management in Cameroon¹⁹. In three years, this project, which essentially aims at the combined impact of digitising civil status events and integrating civil status services in health facilities, resulted in a sevenfold increase in the number of birth certificates issued in the eight pilot councils. Thanks to digitisation, the number of birth certificates produced has grown substantially from 2,535 birth certificates in 31 December 2020 to 19,603 birth certificates on 31 December 2023²⁰,

The Commission is satisfied to note the activities carried out by civil society organisations (CSOs), in particular the organisation by the association *École citoyenne et politique de Yaoundé (ECPY)* of a national workshop on the results of the project entitled “*My civil status, my identity in the context of decentralisation: exchanges of good practice and advocacy*” in Yaoundé, on 14 February 2024. The Chairperson of the CHRC personally participated, along with some 50 other participants in this activity,

The Commission, alongside MINNDEVEL and UNICEF, made the alarming observation that “*for more than a decade, the rate of birth registration in Cameroon has not only stagnated, but [has even declined]*”²¹ particularly in the regions affected by activities of terrorist groups such as *Boko Haram* in the Far North Region and secessionists terrorists in the North-West and South-West Regions,

The Commission remains deeply concerned about the statistics published on 9 August 2024, which show that, out of the 29,460,672 inhabitants of Cameroon²²:

- a total of 30.1 per cent of primary school children do not have birth certificates²³ and

¹⁹ See UNDP Cameroon, “The right to legal existence in less than 24 hours: the story of the digitisation of civil status facts in the Far North Region of Cameroon”, <https://www.undp.org/fr/cameroon/blog/le-droit-existence-legale-en-moins-de-24h-lhistoire-de-la-digitalisation-des-faits-detat-civil-dans-la-region-de-lextreme-nord-du>, accessed on 1 August 2024..

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See “Universal birth registration in Cameroon: Mayors adopt a consensus charter”, <https://www.afriqueeneveil.org/post/enregistrement-universel-des-naissances-au-cameroun-une-charte-consensuelle-adoptee-par-les-maires>, accessed on 30 April 2024.

²² See *Population today*, “Cameroon Population”, <https://populationtoday.com/en/cm-cameroon/>, accessed on 9 August 2024.

²³ See World Bank, “*L'inégalité en pratique : le cas préoccupant des enfants sans acte de naissance au Cameroun*”, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/fr/nasikiliza/inegalite-en-pratique-cas-des-enfants-sans-acte-de-naissance-au-cameroun>, accessed on 9 August 2024.

- a total of 1,500,000 pupils during the 2023-2024 school year, did not have birth certificates²⁴, including 59,163 pupils in examination classes, that is, in *cours moyen deuxième année (CM2)* or Class 6²⁵,

The Commission regrets to note that:

- many rural and remote areas still have limited access to civil registration services and that a significant proportion of the population in these areas is unaware of the benefits and importance of registering civil status events
- despite the incentives put in place for them, some communities are particularly reluctant to incorporate the official registration of births, marriages or deaths into their traditions and do not always recognise the usefulness of registering civil status events for populations whose daily lives are very largely interrupted by agricultural activities.
- language barrier is also an obstacle to understanding the civil registration process and requirements
- the irregular supply of civil registers to civil registration centres, which obstructs the registration process of civil status events
- the obsolescence and poor management of the archive system in many civil status registries, resulting in poor security of civil status data and difficult access to archives, as well as loss or destruction of information in some civil status registries
- the slowness of the process of automating systems for recording civil status documents and events (throughout the entire national territory), which slows down the centralisation of related data and therefore does not facilitate the production of reliable statistics,

The Commission is gratified by the implementation by authorities of the recommendations made to them in its previous Statement to mark Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day, in particular:

- the signing of Presidential Decree No. 2024/333 of 24 July 2024 relating to Cameroon's accession to the United Nations Conventions relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and on the Reduction of Statelessness²⁶
- the organisation of the first National Mayors' Forum on *universal birth registration* in Yaoundé from 26 to 27 April 2024 by MINDDEVEL, with the support of technical and financial partners, to raise awareness among

²⁴ See *Cameroon tribune*, « Actes de naissance : 7 millions de personnes non enregistrées », <https://www.cameroon-tribune.cm/article.html/64544/fr.html/actes-de-naissance-7-millions-de-personnes-nonofficiels>, accessed on 30 July 2024.

²⁵ See Prime Minister's Office, "*Conseil de cabinet avril 2024 : l'acte de naissance une priorité*", <https://www.spm.gov.cm/site/?q=fr/content/conseil-de-cabinet-avril-2024-lacte-de-naissance-une-priorite>, accessed on 8 August 2024.

²⁶ See Republic of Cameroon, Presidency of the Republic, « Décret n° 2024/333 du 24 juillet 2024 portant adhésion du Cameroun aux Conventions des Nations Unies relatives au statut des apatrides et à la réduction des cas d'apatridie, adoptés respectivement le 28 septembre 1954 et le 30 août 1961 à New-York (États-Unis) », https://www.prc.cm/fr/multimedia/documents/10056-decret-n-2024-333-du-24-07-2024?album_id=41, consultée le 2 août 2024.

stakeholders of the need to significantly reduce the number of people without birth certificates²⁷

- the launch in Yaoundé on 22 March 2024 of a special *operation to produce and issue birth certificates to Level 3 pupils*, i.e., those in the CMI-CM2 and Classes 5 and 6 for the English and French sub-systems respectively. This operation was launched by the Minister of Basic Education, with the ultimate objective of issuing 80,000 birth certificates to needy pupils in Cameroon's public primary schools within two months, to enable them to sit the official examinations in May and June 2024²⁸,

The Commission also notes that out of the 291 recommendations addressed to the State of Cameroon following its fourth appearance before the United Nations Human Rights Council within the framework of Universal Periodic Review (UPR), 220 were accepted on 5 April 2024. Of these, 46 related specifically to civil and political rights, four of which concerned the right to identity. The CHRC addressed these recommendations to the following State bodies:

- *the Ministry of Justice (MINJUSTICE), the National Civil Status Registration Office (BUNEC) and the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development (MINDDEVEL) to improve access to birth registration, particularly by facilitating the organisation of mobile court hearings to obtain substitute judgments for issuing birth certificates, especially for people living in inaccessible rural areas*
- *To the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MINAT), MINJUSTICE, the Ministry of External Relations (MINREX) and MINDDEVEL to guarantee the right to nationality for all who are legally qualified and who meet the necessary requirements*
- *the Senate, the National Assembly, MINAT, MINREX, MINJUSTICE and BUNEC to examine the potential of incorporating the Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons into national legislation and to assess the feasibility of integrating the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness into national law,*

The Commission once more recommends that the Government should:

- simplify the administrative procedures for registering births, marriages and deaths
- introduce incentives, such as subsidies or tax exemptions, to encourage families to register civil status events correctly
- ensure that the staff of civil status registries are trained to take account of the specific cultural and linguistic characteristics of indigenous populations, so that they can receive them in the best possible conditions
- organise mobile offices in indigenous communities far from urban centres, in order to facilitate their procedures and issue them with identity documents,

The Commission specifically recommends that MINDDEVEL should:

²⁷ See Letter No. 3027/23/CDHC/V-PDT/SC-PROM/SP/DPP/PROM/NNM/AN of 23 August 2023, addressed to the Minister of Decentralisation and Local Development, by the CHRC Chairperson

²⁸ See. *Parec-Cameroun*, « Lancement officiel de l'opération d'établissement et de délivrance des actes de naissance le 22 mars 2024 », <https://www.parec-cameroun.net/lancement-officiel-de-loperation-detablissement-et-de-delivrance-des-actes-de-naissance-le-22-mars-2024/>, accessed on 2 August 2024.

- extend geographical coverage of services for the registration of civil status events and the collection of civil status data, by opening more civil status registries in remote rural areas
- intensify information and awareness campaigns on the importance of civil status registration
- set up a secure digital registration system for civil status record in order to facilitate data management, conservation and consultation
- ensure the continuous training for staff of civil status registries in order to improve their skills and enhance their ability to guarantee a quality service to users
- institute systems for periodic monitoring and evaluation of the performance of the registration civil documents system in order to identify progress and areas for improvement
- strengthen the role of traditional institutions by formally involving them in the procedures for registering births, marriages and deaths at local level
- integrate community intermediaries to improve cooperation between civil status registries and customary authorities by clearly defining their respective roles and responsibilities
- organise training courses for traditional authorities on administrative procedures for the establishment of civil status documents,

The Commission also recommends that, *public authorities and all those involved in the civil status registration chain* do not delay to take new measures to:

- raise public awareness on the importance of registering civil status events
- involve traditional authorities and community organisations in the birth registration process by encouraging them to report births to civil status registrars so that birth certificates and others civil status documents can be established
- improve training and provide staff responsible for recording civil status events with the necessary and sufficient resources for their on-the-ground deployment
- strengthen coordination between ministries and government bodies involved in civil status registration
- create a centralised digital civil registration system and take initiatives to encourage the registration of civil status documents
- disseminate the positive parenting policy of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family, which aims to raise parents' awareness of how to establish civil status documents
- raise awareness among indigenous peoples by using communication channels adapted to their needs, giving priority to local languages and relying on community radios,

The Commission equally recommends to CSOs to:

- run public awareness and information campaigns on the importance of civil status registration
- set up legal and administrative assistance systems to help families deal with the procedures involved in registering civil status documents
- aim to work closely with the relevant authorities, particularly MINAT and MINDDEVEL, to identify challenges and find practical solutions to improve the registration of civil status documents,

The Commission for its part, is committed to continuing its efforts to raise awareness of the rights of all individuals to their identity. This objective will be met through the implementation of training workshops, awareness campaigns, advocacy initiatives, fact-finding missions and the handling of complaints or self-initiated investigations,

The Commission reiterates its calls for anyone with knowledge of a case of human rights violation, to come forward and report it. In particular, it encourages individuals to report cases of violation of rights arising from the registration of civil status events whether as a victims or witness. To report a case please call the CHRC at its Head Office or branch offices, including via its **toll-free number: 1523 (free calls even without credit).**

Useful addresses of the CHRC.-

Web site: www.cdhc.cm

Facebook and X (former Twitter): **Cameroon Human Rights Commission**

WhatsApp: **691 99 56 90**

