

JOINT DECLARATION: CAMEROON'S UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO CALL ON THE CAMEROON AUTHORITIES TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE ANGLOPHONE REGIONS

Every 4.5 years, each UN member state undergoes a review of its human rights record by the other states at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, known as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). On 14 November 2023, it is Cameroon's turn to have its human rights record reviewed, based on information submitted by the Cameroon government, national and international NGOs and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. It is an opportunity for the international community to talk to the Cameroon government about its human rights commitments, and to make recommendations on how to improve protection and respect for human rights in the country.

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, are calling publicly on the UN member States to produce strong recommendations for the protection and respect of human rights in Cameroon on the eve of Cameroon's Universal Periodic Review. We also call on the Cameroon government, emphatically, to accept these recommendations and to take all necessary measures for their implementation.

We wish to draw all stakeholders' attention to the human rights situation in the North-West and South-West of the country in particular. The population of the Anglophone regions are victims of unlawful killings, murders, sexual violence, the destruction of homes and abductions, committed by the Cameroon defence and security forces, pro-government militias, and armed separatist groups. Amnesty International's latest report (*With or Against Us*, published in July 2023) documented these atrocities in the North-West region in particular.

Abuses denounced on both sides in the North-West and South-West regions

Indeed, since 1 October 2017, when separatist movements proclaimed the independence of the North-West and South-West regions as the 'Federal Republic of Ambazonia', violent clashes between the Cameroonian military and armed separatists, known collectively as 'Ambas' (Ambazonians), have not ceased. The populations of the North-West and South-West regions are caught up in the middle. Their testimonies recount how government soldiers, accusing them of complicity with the Ambas, pour petrol on their homes before setting them alight, and how soldiers rape women and girls from local villages in retaliation for separatist attacks against them. They tell us of armed separatists storming villages and abducting people for ransoms to fund their operations; taking their cattle, and killing those accused of collaborating with the Cameroon authorities or of not complying with the new rules they impose.

In response to this, the Cameroon government has often responded with further human rights violations, arbitrarily arresting and detaining people accused of being armed separatists, or accused of supporting them. To date, hundreds of people have been detained, prosecuted or tried before military tribunals, whose jurisdiction should be reserved for military offenses, according to international standards for the protection of human rights. Many defendants have spent over a year in prison without access to a judge. At the same time, even though the government has announced investigations into atrocities committed by armed separatists or by their own defence and security forces, there is then a lack of transparency on the judicial process that follows, giving rise to fears of impunity and leaving the majority of victims without justice. There have also been many apparent attempts to silence human rights defenders, activists, academics, lawyers and journalists who speak out against atrocities committed in the context of armed violence in the Anglophone

regions. Those denouncing or documenting atrocities committed by either side have also found themselves targeted with death threats, or targeted with arbitrary arrest and judicial harassment.

Faced with the seriousness of these abuses and violations of human rights, we are concerned by the silence surrounding this crisis, which has not seen sufficient attention and action at the international and regional levels. Many state partners of Cameroon have also continued their military cooperation with Cameroon, despite the real risk that the military equipment provided could be used by armed forces, or diverted to militias or armed separatists, to commit atrocities in the Anglophone regions.

Faced with this situation, we call on the Cameroonian government to:

- Immediately investigate all allegations of human rights violations committed by Cameroon’s armed forces, and prosecute those responsible in fair trials;
- Immediately investigate all allegations of crimes committed by armed separatists, and prosecute those responsible in fair trials;
- Ensure that people arrested in the context of the Anglophone crisis are promptly brought before an ordinary court that upholds international fair trial standards, and not before military courts;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all people arbitrarily detained in the context of this crisis and throughout the country;
- Protect journalists, human rights defenders and activists who receive threats for having documented or denounced crimes committed in the context of the armed violence in the Anglophone regions (or elsewhere).

We also call on Cameroon’s international partners to use the UPR process to:

- Condemn crimes committed by Cameroonian security forces, militias and armed separatists, and publicly call on the Government of Cameroon to urgently initiate thorough, independent, impartial investigations;
- Highlight the injustice of cases of arbitrary detention and call for the release of all those arbitrarily detained;
- Call for the protection of journalists, human rights defenders and activists, both in the Anglophone regions and throughout the country.

We hope that the UPR process will send a strong message to the Cameroonian government: **We should all be aware of the human rights violations in the country. It is time for action to stop the atrocities and to protect human rights.**



