



THE INCREASING CALL FOR DIALOGUE

The National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (NCHRF) has since the beginning of this year been calling for constructive dialogue in search for solutions to the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon. Law N° 2004/16 of 22/07/2004 to set up the NCHRF makes it **an independent institution for consultation, monitoring, evaluation, dialogue, concerted action, promotion and protection** in the domain of human rights. This mission statement places dialogue at the centre of its stated actions. As human rights defenders, National Human Rights Institutions stand against violence and encourage the use of dialogue in conflict resolution. Violence often leads to destruction while peaceful and constructive dialogue builds up.

All human rights defenders say no to violence and yes to dialogue. The Commission's report on the crisis produced in February this year recommended the move that was taken by the Head of State towards the release of persons arrested in relations with the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon based then on the provisions of section 13 of law n° 2008/015 of 29/12/2008. Among other recommendations in the report was the recommendation to use a mediator in dialogue to facilitate the resolution of the crisis. In the Commission's quarterly publication "Born Free" of February 2017 we again said no to violence and called for dialogue. In a press release on the 31st of August 2017, we called for the resumption of schools, an end to ghost towns and sustained dialogue in the search of lasting solutions to the issues raised in the crisis. The other human rights defenders/authorities who have stood against violence and called for dialogue include civil society organisations, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, the Common Wealth Secretariat, the United Nations Secretary General and our Head of State. As we have consistently done in the past, we strongly condemn the violence perpetrated around manifestations on the 22nd of September and the 1st of October 2017 from whatever source it came. We equally condemn

arbitrary arrests and detentions in relation with these manifestations. We deeply regret the loss of lives and the destruction of property.

Surprisingly, we have seen and heard people over media organs and programmes doubting the purpose for further dialogue. Some of those doubting know that dialogue has been carried out in connection with the grievances expressed by the teachers' and lawyers' trade unions and that steps are being taken to solve the problems raised. They do not seem to see the need for further dialogue. Specialists in conflict resolution insist on a **properly moderated peaceful, sustained, inclusive and constructive dialogue** for lasting solutions to problems raised.

It has become evident that the issues raised by teachers and lawyers were just entry points into a debate which has included other important issues which need to be resolved to ensure our cherished emergence in 2035. On the 31/12/2013, President Paul Biya doubted why the various plans and resources deployed by Cameroon were not producing the expected results. We could say that he expressed frustration. Unfortunately, some actors did not respond sufficiently to this. They waited until the teachers and lawyers also expressed their frustrations before they engaged in dialogue. Two arms of our government (the Administrative and the Judicial arms) have been at work and there is need for assurance that they would continue with fruitful dialogue. The Legislative arm of Government came out on the 1st of October 2017 and called for peace and unity. This was a positive step and we believe that arm can do much more.

The various commissions established to conduct dialogue have avoided handling issues requiring political solutions because these were not included in their mandates. For example, these commissions have not handled the issue of decentralization which to many, is the key to the solution of the many problems plaguing the country. Whereas some people fear that decentralization would divide the country and lead to its disintegration, some believe that an appropriate form of decentralization would enhance development.

Many people argue that centralization is for the benefit of a few (less than 20% of the population) leaving the majority (over 80% of the population) in abject poverty. These become

vulnerable and are easily recruited by groups for undesirable activities that call for repression, incarceration, mounting number of inmates, torture and loss of lives and property. They argue that federalism is a good form of decentralization which allows the national or federal government to concentrate on a few highly essential issues for the overall security of the nation and the facilitation of the production and distribution of goods and services mainly by the decentralized units and the private sector. Federalism is therefore perceived as a means of promoting a faster rate of development because it allows for an increased participation of the population in development efforts thereby creating more room for competition in creativity and innovation while following norms that are set up and enforced by the national or federal government.

Parliament could take the lead in encouraging a healthy debate on this issue of decentralization in a timely manner knowing that the vast majority of Cameroonians of the North West and South West Regions is interested in preserving the size of the country but would like to see the running of it decentralized for enhanced harmonious development in the general interest of all the citizens. Cameroonians should be encouraged to continue fighting against external enemies rather than killing their own citizens.

It must be noted that the peaceful cohabitation of Cameroonians has been appreciated for long by many. The level of ecumenism in Cameroon is very high and in each town, one can find people of so many ethnic backgrounds living together with a high level of intermarriages and open cultural manifestations. Millions have left their places of birth and have settled elsewhere. Integration is therefore very advanced among the citizens of Cameroon. Cameroonians also easily communicate among themselves. What requires improvement is the level of official bilingualism. The general problem in Cameroon is that of development: poor infrastructure and very little industrialization. Consequently, there is a high level of unemployment and poverty of the masses. We must avoid the use of violence and organize open, inclusive and constructive dialogue in the search of lasting solutions.

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Chairperson NCHRF 09/10/2017