

KLW BRIEFING

Updates for the Coalition for Dialogue and Negotiation

Judith Yah Sunday Leads Queen Mothers to Denounce Atrocities in Anglophone Regions

By Journal du Cameroun | December 24, 2020

Mafor Judith Yah Sunday on Thursday, December 24 gathered queen mothers and other women in the North West Region to once again denounce and mourn the gruesome killing of their children by belligerents in the North West and South west regions. In the presence of the Fon of Bawock, they prayed and lamented together while urging the belligerents to sue for peace so that our beloved regions regain peace which is a condition sinequanon for sustainable development. With placards and peace plants the Mafors chanted songs of worship and praise to the Most High and implored His mercy on the two regions. The mourning culminated in a peace walk on the commercial avenue with placards bearing messages such as: "We need pens not bullets": "Stop the killings", "We are tired of mourning, we want



In Cameroon, Journalists Can't Breathe as Laws Stifle Press Freedom

By Ndi Eugene Ndi | December 25, 2020

While Sierra Leone and Liberia now join African countries where libel or slander is a civil and not criminal offense, journalists in Cameroon are still, in effect, caught up in a state-supported chokehold of their trade. The country has seen a spike in arbitrary arrests and detentions, harassments and other

forms of attacks on journalists for their work. Ahmed Abba, Radio France Internationale's Hausa-language correspondent, who was accused of terrorism, spent 29 months in detention before he was released in 2017 and forced to go into exile. Journalist Samuel Wazizi, whose legal name was Samuel Ajiekah Abuwe, died in military custody in Yaoundé in August 2019, but the military made his death public only on June 5, 2020, following pressure from many quarters. He was arrested in a township in the conflict-ridden southwest region of the country and accused of having links with armed separatists. In 2010, journalist Bibi Ngota also died in government custody, according to the CPJ. At least six other journalists in the country, including Kingsley Fumunyuy Njoka, Thomas Awah Junior and Paul Tchouta are in jail. Jude Viban, the national president of the Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalists (CAMASEJ), says he receives complaints daily from members about harassment, threats and intimidation by people with political power. "Journalism as a whole and journalists across the world have the same problems of intimidation, threats and attacks because they work on sensitive issues. But in Cameroon, it is accentuated and more complex," says Mr Viban. He blames the situation on laws which give little or no protection to media professionals. Although the preamble to Cameroon's 1996 constitution guarantees both freedom of expression and of the press, libel and slander remain both civil and criminal offenses. A guilty verdict can mean a prison term of up to six months and or a hefty fine. According to Mr Kini, the criminalization of press offenses has affected the quality of journalism in the country, because it has forced journalists to exercise self-censorship. Arrey Collins Ojong of Arrey & Associates Law Office, a lawyer who offers pro bono defense to journalists and other vulnerable persons, says he is profoundly alarmed about the current state of the media and journalists in Cameroon because the existing legislation is solely punitive. Apart from the constitution and a few ratified conventions, which are hardly



Some Cameroonians reading newspaper front pages at a kiosk adjacent the Ministry of Finance in Yaoundé.

Corruption Runs Rampant in Cameroon's Mining Sector

By Balentina Ruiz Leotaud |
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A report prepared by Transparency International Cameroon and Forêts et Développement Rural states that the lack of a clear regulatory framework has led to the entrenchment of illegal practices within Cameroon's mining sector, which are supported by rampant corruption. The document overlays the legal framework that governs the mining sector in Cameroon to data collected in the field through focus group discussions and interviews with mine operators, authorities, and communities. It found that the absence of the 2016 Mining Code Implementing Decree favors a state of anarchy within the sector. Based on their findings, the NGOs believe that the absence of the code also promotes illicit practices such as influence peddling, favoritism, corruption and fraud, involving political elites such as MPs, senators, mayors, ministers, divisional officers and the military. The organizations were also made aware of recent reports related to the increased influence of the President's office in the granting of mining permits. "Almost 95% of companies operating in the mining sector are of foreign nationality, in particular South Korean and Chinese. Behind each of these companies are believed to be Cameroonian personalities," the report reads. During the fieldwork, TI and FODER found that the majority of exploration permit holders do not meet the technical and financial requirements established in the law and, despite this, their permits are regularly renewed after they expire.



Woman panning for gold in Cameroon

ever applied, authorities have done little to nothing to put in place legislation that protects free speech, press freedom and digital rights for citizens and journalists, Mr Arrey said. "For instance, the Cameroonian Penal code still convicts individuals found guilty of defamation under its section 305 with an imprisonment of from six days to six months and with a fine of between FCFA5,000 and FCFA2 million," Mr Arrey explained, citing it as part of laws that hinder press freedom in Cameroon. Another issue which further compounds the situation of the Cameroonian journalist is the lack of access to official sources of information. The country lacks a Freedom of Information Act which would compel official sources to disclose public information. This, according to Mr Kini, forces journalists to resort to secondary sources which are sometimes not trustworthy. Despite the fact that Cameroon has ratified both the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which provide protections for journalists and their sources, the Yaoundé regime seems to be in no hurry to give journalists the rights they deserve. In an apparent move to further muzzle the press, the government went on to enact a controversial law that directly influences the functioning of journalism and limits reporting especially on human rights violations in the country. Leaning on the controversial 2014 anti-terrorism law, Yaoundé can label journalists, opinion leaders, activists and government critics "terrorists" and prosecute them in military courts. Mr Arrey explains that the ambiguous law also gives law enforcement officers the leverage to continue restricting press freedom by arresting, detaining, physically abusing and harassing journalists and anyone suspected of holding an opinion and information they are empowered by the said legislation to interpret as acts of terrorism. There have been cases where journalists who are covering riot and protests in the country are treated the same way as protesters and charged or tried under provisions of the said law and punished. At least eight journalists were arrested and detained in different police stations in the political capital Yaoundé and economic capital Douala last September while covering the anti-Biya protests. Rights groups have indicted the military combating Boko Haram in the north and in the crackdown on armed separatist fighters pushing for the secession and independence of the country's two English-speaking regions. Out of fear of being persecuted and or prosecuted as well as the inability to gain access to official sources of information, journalists have underreported the security forces' excesses and human rights violations in these areas. In response to criticisms for the use of obnoxious laws to muzzle the press, authorities have, in the past, touted the number of private media outlets in the country as proof that the press is free. According to media reports, the government has registered over 600 newspapers, most of which are community and regional papers and are published only occasionally. Mr Kini and Mr Viban argue, however, that press freedom cannot be measured only by the number of private media outlets. "It is not because you have a thousand newspapers that you think the press is free. When we have these thousands of newspapers with doubtful publishers and editors, it therefore means that they can be easily manipulated," says Viban. "It is important to have newspapers that are independent, credible and that can help the population to make informed choices. Having many media organs that are not helping to inform deepens mistrust in government." Both Ndi Chia and Bobiokono do not see any government will to have a free and independent media in the country. Pro-democracy advocates fear a free and independent media may be a far-fetched dream for Cameroon as long-serving rulers like Biya will

always try to control the narrative and manipulate their own version of reality, scheme that cannot be achieved with a free and independent media.

Massacre of 21 Villagers Leads to Rare Trial for Soldiers in Cameroon

By Geoffrey York | December 23, 2020

Traveling by motorbike, car and bus, Taah Ali journeyed on bad roads for two days to reach Cameroon's capital. He had a story to tell: a story about a horrific massacre that had killed 21 people in his village. Mr. Ali is a key witness in the trial of two soldiers and a paramilitary police officer who allegedly participated in the Ngarbuh massacre – one of many atrocities in Cameroon's prolonged conflict over separatism in its anglophone regions. His relatives were among the dead and injured in the massacre. Human rights groups see the Ngarbuh trial as a vital move in tackling impunity among Cameroon's security forces. "Survivors and family members of those murdered in Ngarbuh are finally a step closer to getting justice," said Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Ngarbuh was not an isolated case, but part of a long history of military abuses in the anglophone regions," Human Rights Watch said in a statement. "Impunity has been a key driver of the Anglophone crisis and there has been little to no accountability for serious crimes committed by both government forces and armed separatist fighters." For their alleged roles in the Ngarbuh massacre, the three members of Cameroon's security forces have been charged with murder, destruction, arson, disobeying orders and violence against a pregnant woman. After the arduous journey from his village, Mr. Ali was not called to testify last week at the opening of the trial, which focused largely on procedural issues. The trial was adjourned until Jan. 21, so he will be obliged to make the long trek to the capital again. His difficulties in traveling to the military court are just one example of the challenges facing the trial. Several witnesses have reportedly gone into hiding because of threats from members of the security forces. Other witnesses might find it too expensive or dangerous to attend the trial, Human Rights Watch says. Another issue is the lack of criminal charges against senior security-force commanders. Those facing charges could be low-ranking "scapegoats" for senior officers who ordered the attack, according to lawyers for the families of the victims. In addition, 17 members of a vigilante group and a former separatist fighter have been accused of involvement in the Ngarbuh massacre. The fighter was arrested but fled from custody. A military prosecutor told the court last week that the state has been unable to identify the vigilantes. "We expect that those who gave the orders, those who were there and those who masterminded the killings of these innocent souls should be brought to court, so that we all understand exactly what happened," said Richard Tamfu, another lawyer for the victims and their families. "The whole world was very touched by the tragedy of what happened in Ngarbuh on Feb. 14," he told The Globe. "We expect a fair hearing and justice for the people of Ngarbuh."