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## Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders Annual Report 2007 - Cameroon

### Political context

Although the legislative and municipal elections held on July 22 and September 30, 2007 gave President Paul Biya, who had been in power since 1982, a large majority in the Assembly, the opposition parties and NGOs denounced the election as fraudulent and several appeals were made against the results. In addition, in his end of year speech the President spoke in favour of modifying article 6.2 of the Constitution, which limits presidential mandates to two consecutive seven-year terms of office, which would allow him to seek one or more further terms.

According to the United Nations,<sup>1</sup> in development terms the country had not yet managed to make any significant improvement regarding its citizens' living conditions by the end of 2006, despite overall good economic performances. The same situation was true in 2007.

Cameroon is still faced with serious problems of democratic deficiency and of governance, notably due to deficiencies in the management of public affairs, to corruption, to impunity, to the obstacles to civil society participation in public life and to recurrent human rights violations, especially of economic and social rights (access to resources, public services, work, health, education, housing, etc.).

### Threats made against defenders who condemn massive corruption

There was no significant progress in 2007 in Cameroon in the fight against the massive corruption that affects all sectors of public life, despite ratification of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, the adoption of specific provisions as part of the revision of the Criminal Code in January 2007 and the creation of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (*Commission nationale anti-corruption* – CONAC) in March 2006.

Indeed, human rights defenders who report corruption are currently vulnerable to reprisals carried out with the complicity of the State apparatus. The Cameroon House for Human Rights (*Maison des droits de l'Homme du Cameroon* – MDHC) and its Head Coordinator, Ms. **Madeleine Afité**, were harassed after reporting abuses and manipulations carried out by the police, notably in numerous cases of corruption in which they were involved. Surveillance, verbal and telephone threats as well as telephone bugging were used, for example, to try and prevent MDHC from pursuing its investigations into the follow-up to the independent enquiry into the death of Ms. Laurence Vergne in January 2007. MDHC had stated that a top official of the legal

system was protecting one of the suspects arrested by the police, a gang chief involved in organised crime. Ms. Afité was also subjected to police harassment, including being called before the military examining magistrate and questioned about the organisation's methods, its information sources and in particular its legitimate authority to carry out investigations, as well as its motivations in taking action that "destroys the image of Cameroon outside the country". In parallel, the authorities threatened to carry out a campaign to stigmatise NGOs in the national media and threatened her with legal proceedings.

### Continued judicial harassment and intimidation of defenders

The threat of legal proceedings is used against defenders with the aim of dissuading them from carrying out their activities. It is used in particular against those who are considered as leaders, in order to intimidate other defenders. In September 2007, a demonstration against judicial insecurity was forbidden at the last minute by the Public Prosecutor of Maroua. The latter threatened to undertake proceedings against Mr. **Abdoulaye Math**, Chairman of the Movement for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms (*Mouvement de défense des droits de l'Homme et des libertés* – MDDHL), holding him responsible for not preventing some associations from demonstrating as they had not received information about the ban. Another instance is that of the trial before the Appeal Court of the Far North of one of the association's members, Mr. **Adama Mal-Sali**, for "defamation and slanderous denunciations" against a village chief (who had refused him permission to gather witnesses' evidence of human rights violations), which has continued since 2006. In 2007, hearings were postponed on four occasions because of the non-appearance of the village chief or of witnesses. This practice illustrates the poor operation of the justice system and the obstacles to defenders' freedom of action, which is likely to discourage them from carrying out missions.

In addition, defenders, who are generally regarded as political opponents, regularly suffer abuse from State agents and come up against recurrent obstacles to obtaining information, especially in places of deprivation of liberty. Arrests have sometimes been used as a form of intimidation: Messrs. **Jean Marc Bikoko**, **Hervé Yao André Benang** and **Jules Patrick Mvondo Essiga**, and Ms. **Brigitte Tamo**, members of the Confederation of Civil Service Trade Unions (*Centrale syndicale du secteur public*) were arrested on November 28, 2007 after organising union action for the raising of civil servants' salaries. They were all freed several hours later. A sign of the suspicion in which human rights organisations are held is the infiltration by intelligence agents and informers of their premises and of activities organised by them (conferences, debates, forums, etc.).

*The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders is a joint programme of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH).*

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<sup>1</sup> See the United Nations System Common Country Assessment based on the Cameroon Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy Document (Document de stratégie de réduction de la pauvreté), December 2006.

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