

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk concludes official visit to Cameroon



Good evening, and thank you for coming.*

I have just concluded a brief, but important visit to Cameroon. I am grateful to the President and the Government for their invitation, and for their openness to discussing a wide range of human rights issues with me and my Office here. I have a strong connection with Cameroon, having engaged personally over many years with the people of this richly diverse country.

Cameroon today faces multiple complex human rights challenges – but also opportunities, particularly given its extremely youthful population, with more than 40 per cent of Cameroonians under the age of 15, as well as a vibrant civil society. Globally, young people are influencing action on issues of national and international importance, prompting social change – on climate change, on equality, on accountability, and more.

The electoral process in Cameroon, leading up to the 2025 and 2026 elections, is a key opportunity to reinforce political inclusiveness and facilitate the participation of all segments of society, including young people, women, populations in conflict-affected areas, displaced people and people with disabilities, to ensure the free expression of political opinions. To make sure the space is protected for robust discussion and debate on how to tackle the challenges together, as a country.

Among the most difficult challenges are the three simultaneous security crises in different parts of Cameroon: the situation in the North-West and South-West regions, with ongoing serious human rights abuses and violations against the civilian population; the impact of the attacks by Boko Haram-affiliated and splinter groups in the Far North region; and the spillover effects of the crisis in the Central African Republic in the east.

Cameroon is also located in a region strongly affected by the climate crisis, particularly in the Far North region. As we see in many parts of the world today, drought, erratic rainfall and increasing desertification in the Lake Chad Basin have triggered tensions and violence, sometimes between herder and farmer communities.

Cameroon is an important refugee hosting country. As of June this year, around 1 million people were also internally displaced in Cameroon, and a total of 3.4 million needed humanitarian assistance, out of a population of 28 million. The international community needs to step up to ensure the humanitarian needs are adequately funded.

In the North-West and South-West regions, what began as peaceful protests in 2016 has turned into a major crisis for the civilian population, with clashes between separatist groups, other armed groups, and security forces, including the military, leaving thousands killed, hundreds of thousands displaced, and the denial of the right to education to more than 700,000 children. Reports continue to emerge of human rights violations and abuses, including unlawful killings, ill-treatment and torture, kidnappings for ransom, and restrictions on freedom of movement. The imposition of “lockdown days” by separatist groups, preventing children from going to school, people from accessing their livelihoods, at the risk of being shot – this is unacceptable and should be roundly condemned.

No stone should be left unturned in efforts to silence the guns and bring this untenable crisis to an end – through dialogue with those who have grievances and demands, through accountability for the perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses, and through reconciliation measures, including an evaluation of existing Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes for certain members of armed groups.

Regrettably, there is persistent impunity for grave violations. The fight against impunity is absolutely key – regardless of the affiliation of the perpetrators – as it will go a long way in building confidence between citizens and the State. Where State security forces have been implicated in violations, it is essential that investigations take place independently, promptly and transparently, and perpetrators are brought to justice, alongside provision of protection for victims and witnesses. I was given assurances by the Government in this regard.

A victim-centered approach must guide all efforts to resolve this protracted crisis, and I have called on the Government to facilitate humanitarian access to areas affected by conflict. I have also urged the Government to revise the 2014 anti-terrorism law in this regard.

My Office is ready to provide advice and assistance. I have asked the authorities to facilitate an assessment mission by a team of UN human rights officers to the North-West and South-West regions to assess progress following the recommendations of our report in 2019, and conduct further evaluation of the situation.

In my meetings with civil society, we discussed serious concerns over restrictions on the freedom of expression and association and the right to peaceful assembly, and the need to ensure better protection of human rights defenders.

The period leading up to elections is always a particularly sensitive one, in all countries in the world. I called on political parties, across the spectrum, to commit publicly to the human rights cause, notably to ensuring the rights to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly will be defended in the context of the 2025 and 2026 elections.

Civil society organisations and journalists need to be able to carry out essential monitoring and reporting in the pre-electoral context, alongside the Commission des Droits de l’Homme du Cameroun (CDHC), including with regard to countering hate speech and disinformation – without intimidation or fear of reprisal. Action on emblematic legal proceedings would help send clear messages against impunity and serve to prevent further violations.

Senior Government officials acknowledged that Cameroon needs to prioritise increasing the number of women in leadership positions across the board, including in parliament, regional councils and municipal councils.

I also called on Cameroon to accelerate adoption of comprehensive legislation on violence against women, and to revise the penal code to ensure access to justice and other essential services for victims. Harmful practices, including forced or early marriage, sexual harassment, rape and sexual mutilation must be vigorously tackled.

Inequalities and unlawful discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, linguistic origin, sexual orientation, and other grounds need to be eliminated.

Cameroon clearly has the potential to be a leader in sustainable development, including by starting to adopt a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights and ensuring sufficient resources in national budget for climate change adaptation and mitigation measures.

While my visit lasted only two days, and this is by no means a comprehensive picture of the human rights situation in the country, our Office has been present in Yaoundé since 2001, engaging closely with the Cameroonian authorities, civil society and other actors, as well as covering nine other countries in the Central African region.

I am grateful to the Government of Cameroon for providing larger premises – which I was able to inaugurate today – for my regional office in Yaoundé. The cooperation and support of the authorities and the international community will allow the UN Human Rights Office to strengthen its work in the region.

Cameroon plays an important role in the multilateral fora, particularly the UN, regionally and internationally – and it will soon take up the presidency of the UN General Assembly during its 2024-2025 session. I look forward to continuing to count on Cameroon's support in ensuring that the universal values of human rights permeate regional and international discussions on peace, security and development – as well as at the national level.

**Parts of this speech were delivered in English, and parts in French.*