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PRESS RELEASE

**THE CAMEROON HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION'S INVESTIGATION INTO THE ALLEGED
ARREST AND DETENTION OF A GROUP OF VISUALLY-IMPAIRED PERSONS
AT THE CENTRAL POLICE STATION NO. 1 OF YAOUNDE**

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (hereinafter: "the Commission or the CHRC") received, on 24 June 2022, a copy of a press release, and a document entitled "Strike Notice" signed by Mr BEVO NDZANA Patrick, representing the 'Collectif des malvoyants indignés du Cameroun' (CAMIC). The Strike Notice was based on some demands concerning their specific rights, which they had transmitted to the authorities some months ago.

On examining these documents that CAMIC transmitted to the CHRC the following findings were made:

- CAMIC participated in four meetings at the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) on 18 December 2021, 18 March 2022, and 8 and 13 April 2022 respectively, to inform the members of the *Collective* of the measures the Government had taken to address their demands, and thus forestall the hunger strike they were mustering up to organise in 2021.
- The demands concerned:
 - the immediate recruitment of the three visually impaired journalists who failed the direct entrance examination for the civil service in 2020
 - the granting of a disability pension to persons with disabilities in Cameroon
 - the creation of a special fund for projects and micro-projects for people with disabilities
 - the organisation of special recruitment to the civil service, exclusively reserved for persons living with a disability
 - the respect of the 10 per cent quota reserved for persons with disabilities, considering the different types of disabilities, in public examinations and recruitments to public and private sector jobs.
- Apart from the age exemption provided for in Order No. 040/PM of 19 May 2022 establishing the conditions for granting age exemptions to persons with disabilities in administrative examinations and recruitment to the State civil service, no other demands have been met.
- Faced with the failure to take their demands seriously, they decided to organise a sit-down on 27 June 2022 outside the Prime Minister's Office, carrying placards.

The CHRC equally discovered a video posted on social media (WhatsApp, Facebook) on 27 June 2022, in which a group of visually impaired persons were in custody in the Yaounde Central Police Station No. 1, after being arrested by elements of that police station during a demonstration in front of the Prime Minister's Office.

Créée par la loi n° 2019/014 du 19 juillet 2019, la CDHC est une institution indépendante de consultation, d'observation, d'évaluation, de dialogue, de conciliation et de concertation en matière de promotion et de protection des droits de l'homme. La Commission fait également office de Mécanisme National de Prévention de la torture du Cameroun.

Created by law n° 2019/014 of 19 July 2019, the CHRC is an independent institution for consultation, monitoring, evaluation, dialogue, conciliation and deliberation in the promotion and protection of human rights. The Commission shall also serve as the Cameroon National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture.

Based on the provisions of Section 7 of Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019 relating to the establishment, organisation and functioning of the CHRC, which stipulates that to carry out its duties, "the Commission [...] may conduct investigations in accordance with the laws in force, particularly by:

- *carrying out all necessary inspections*
- *accessing any place of alleged human rights violations;*
- *gathering all necessary information,*

the CHRC conducted a visit to the Yaounde Central Police Station No. 1 on the same day to verify the alleged cases circulated on social media. During the visit, the CHRC interviewed the twenty-seven (27) visually impaired persons arrested, including nineteen (19) men and eight (8) women, before the representative of the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) of the Mfoundi Division, three senior officials of the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) and the Officer-in-charge of the Central Police Station No. 1.

The findings of the visit revealed that:

- the sit-in in front of the Prime Minister's Office on 27 June 2022 from 6 a.m. was organised by more than eighty (80) visually impaired persons from the North, South-West, Littoral, West and Centre Regions, to make their voices heard and echo their specific demands,
- a total of twenty-seven (27) of them were arrested at around 8 a.m. by police officers from the Yaounde Central Police Station No. 1 and transported to the station, where they were held in police custody,
- some of these visually impaired persons alleged that they were molested by the police during their arrest; some of them had broken canes, while others had torn clothes,
- meanwhile, several of them made disrespectful and malicious remarks towards the authorities present and exhibited a violent attitude during the discussions, making the entire process difficult,
- the SDO's representative stated that he had not been informed of any public demonstration or strike notices from CAMIC members,
- the issues raised were well-founded and had been discussed during the four (4) working sessions held at MINAS between December 2021 and April 2022 with CAMIC representatives.

During the discussions, the Ministry of Social Affairs representatives informed the demonstrators that measures were underway to address their demands, such as:

- the immediate recruitment of the three visually impaired journalists who failed the direct entrance examination for the public service in 2020, the procedure being underway following the instructions of the President of the Republic
- the competent Ministries are considering granting a disability pension to persons with disabilities in Cameroon. However, it should be indicated that such demand would take time to be implemented due to the financial difficulties that the State of Cameroon is going through at the moment
- The creation of a special fund for projects and micro-projects involving persons with disabilities would also be difficult to implement due to the financial constraints mentioned above. However, copies of requests for project funding addressed to MINAS by some of these visually impaired persons and still unanswered to date, were collected by the officials of this Ministry for follow-up
- Concerning the observance of the 10 per cent quota reserved for persons with disabilities in public entrance examinations and recruitment to public and private jobs, the visually impaired were advised to wait for the launching of the said examinations by the State, so they can sit in for them according

to the required qualifications, on the understanding that the number of successful candidates will be determined according to the number of those who actually sat in for the competitive exams.

The detained visually impaired persons were released and advised to return to their communities pending the outcome of the measures being implemented by the Government concerning their demands. They were released at about 1:45 p.m. and MINAS officials immediately gave transport fares to those who were ready to return home.

Three days later, two (2) other videos were posted on social media. The videos show two (2) groups of visually impaired persons declaring that police officers arrested them at the Central Post Office on the morning of 30 June 2022 during their demonstrations, transported and abandoned them out of Yaounde city, respectively in Soa, in the Mefou-et-Afamba Division, and Mbalmayo, in the Nyong-et-So'o Division.

When the competent services of the CHRC contacted them for further information, the representative of CAMIC stated:

- that after they had been released at the Yaounde Central Police Station No. 1, they decided to demonstrate at the Central Post Office on the morning of 30 June 2022 with placards about their demands
- that fifteen (15) of them were arrested, transported and abandoned outside the city of Yaounde, five (5) in Soa and 10 in Mbalmayo, by the police.

On 11 July 2022, CAMIC issued a press release on social media denouncing the treatment inflicted on its members during their protests in front of the Prime Minister's Office, and the incidents described above.

Furthermore, information obtained from reliable sources about the said demonstrations by those visually impaired persons indicates that some of them would use these demonstrations to obtain money from goodwill souls. They reportedly received the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand (150,000) FCFA francs from the Director of the National Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled (CNRPH), for their transport costs to their respective towns, after a working session with him.

Referring to the first indent of the Preamble to the Constitution of Cameroon of 18 January 1996 which proclaims that "*all persons shall have equal rights and obligations. The State shall provide all its citizens with the conditions necessary for their development*", and Article 18 (4) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which states that "*The aged and the disabled shall also have the right to special measures of protection in keeping with their physical or moral needs.*"

Considering the 12th indent of the Preamble to the Constitution of 18 January 1996 which states that "*every person has a right to life, to physical and moral integrity and humane treatment in all circumstances. Under no circumstances shall any person be subjected to torture, to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment*",

Considering Article 4 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which states that "*Human beings are inviolable. Every human being shall be entitled to respect for his life and the integrity of his person. No one may be arbitrarily deprived of this right,*"

Recalling the 16th indent of the Preamble to the Constitution of 18 January 1996, which provides that *"the freedom of communication, of expression, of the press, of assembly, of association, and trade unionism, as well as the right to strike, shall be guaranteed under the conditions fixed by law"*,

Recalling Article 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which emphasises that *"Every individual shall have the right to assemble freely with others. The exercise of this right shall be subject only to necessary restrictions provided for by law, in particular, those enacted in the interest of national security, the safety, health, ethics and rights and freedoms of others"*,

Recalling Article 19 paragraph 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights proclaims that *"The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others"*,

Considering Section 38 (2) of Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities in Cameroon, which provides that *"at equal qualification, priority in recruitment shall be given to persons with disabilities"* and the 22nd indent of the above-mentioned Constitution of 18 January 1996 which stresses that *"every person shall have the right and the obligation to work"* and Article 15 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which states that *"Every individual shall have the right to work under equitable and satisfactory conditions, and shall receive equal pay for equal work"*,

The Commission commends the recent actions the Government has undertaken to assist persons with disabilities in Cameroon, particularly the signing of Order No. 040/PM of 19 May 2022 which, in Section 2, states that *"Persons with disabilities who can prove that they have completed vocational, school or university training and who are holders of a National Disability Card benefit from age exemption for competitive examinations and recruitment into public jobs"*;

The Commission equally commends the timely action of MINAS officials, the SDO of Mfoundi, and Yaounde Central Police Commissioner No. 1, who held lengthy discussions with the visually impaired persons who were arrested, informing them on Government's measures to address their grievances and facilitating the safe return of those who were willing to go back home;

However, **the Commission condemns** the acts of brutality the Police officers of the said station meted out to the visually impaired during their arrest on 27 June in front of the Prime Minister's Office, and the inhuman and degrading treatment the officers inflicted on them after arresting them on 30 June 2022 at the Central Post Office during their second demonstration, and transporting them out of Yaounde, abandoning some of them in Soa, and others in Mbalmayo;

The Commission deplores that some members of CAMIC still do not consider the explanations senior MINAS officials gave during the discussions held on 27 June 2022 in the Yaounde Central Police Station No. 1 and **also deplores** the protesters' disrespectful remarks and violent attitude towards the officials present;

The Commission further deplores that some of these demonstrators are using the situation as an opportunity to extort money from people of goodwill under the guise of covering the cost of transport back to their respective communities;



The Commission urges the CAMIC members to remain calm and **recommends** that they collaborate with the actors concerned in following up on their demands to find concerted solutions;

The Commission urges the government to quickly implement the measures adopted for persons living with disabilities and particularly the visually impaired, to find lasting solutions for all the specific rights of persons with disabilities in Cameroon to be given due consideration.

Yaounde,

25 JUL 2022



James MOUANGUE KOBILA