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STATEMENT BY THE CAMEROON HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSION TO MARK THE GLOBAL HANDWASHING DAY

15 October 2022

Theme: Unite for Universal Hand Hygiene

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (hereinafter: “The Commission”), established by Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019 and set up on 29 April 2021, following the swearing-in of its members before the Supreme Court sitting in Joint Chambers,

Considering that the UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292 which, on 28 July 2010, explicitly recognised the human right to water and sanitation,

Recalling that Global Handwashing Day, established by the Global Handwashing Partnership, to mark the World Water Week organised each year in Stockholm, Sweden, from 17 to 23 August 2008, is a *global advocacy day dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding about the importance of handwashing with soap as an effective and affordable way to prevent diseases and save lives*¹,

Bearing in mind that the 2022 Global Handwashing Day is celebrated under the theme: *Unite for Universal Hand Hygiene*, since “*by washing our hands with soap, each person can make his community healthier*”²,

Noting that the WHO/UNICEF global partnership attaches particular importance to the prevention and fight against waterborne diseases, by celebrating two other world days in the same year, namely World Hand Hygiene Day, on 5 May and World Toilet Day, on 19 November,

Bearing in mind the 2022 World Hand Hygiene Day celebrated under the theme: “*Unite for safety: clean your hands*” aimed at promoting a handwashing culture and at urging healthcare workers, patients and their family members “*to increase awareness and understanding about the importance of handwashing with soap as an effective and affordable way to prevent diseases and save lives*”³,

¹ www.globalhandwashing.org, consulted on 6 September 2022.

² <https://www.unicef.fr/article/15-octobre-journee-mondiale-du-lavage-des-mains/>, consulted on 10 October 2022.

³ Speech from Ms MATSHIDISO MOETI, WHO Regional Director for Africa <https://www.afro.who.int/fr/regional-director/speeches-messages/journee-mondiale-de-lhygiene-des-mains-2022>, consulted on 10 September 2022.

Noting the WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene and Healthcare provide healthcare workers, hospital administrators and health authorities with a thorough review of evidence on hand hygiene in healthcare and to reduce new-born mortality rates owing to waterborne diseases, by implementing simple behavioural changes,

Bearing in mind the second target of Sustainable Development Goal 6 that calls on the international community to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene services for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations by 2030,

Recalling that, according to Dr MATSHIDISO MOETI, WHO Regional Director for Africa, correct, frequent hand hygiene also plays a significant role in the fight against epidemics and pandemics, as we have seen from the response to COVID-19 and cholera, as well as the burgeoning threat of antimicrobial resistance⁴,

Recalling further that, according to SANJAY WIJESEKERA, UNICEF's Director of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programmes, handwashing before eating or after defecation is an extraordinary tool that would benefit the whole world, since you "*simply wet your hands, soap them and rinse them*"⁵,

Considering the African Sanitation Policy Guidelines launched on 10 June 2021 in Lagos, Nigeria, which constitute the minimum standards for the development of a sanitation policy, to achieve the conditions for sustainable hygiene,

Recalling that Cameroon ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted on 16 December 1966 by UN General Assembly Resolution 2200 A (XXI) on 27 June 1984, a legal instrument which entered into force on 23 March 1976, whose Article 1 provides that "*the States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical ... health*",

Noting that handwashing with soap is particularly effective concerning hygiene since it:

- removes about 80 per cent of microbes from the hands⁶ and thereby reduces diarrhoeal diseases by 30-48 per cent⁷
- reduces acute respiratory infections by up to 20 per cent⁸
- reduces the transmission of epidemic-related pathogens such as cholera, Ebola virus, shigellosis, hepatitis E, gastroenteritis, conjunctivitis, colds, flu and today, the *coronavirus*
- protects against nosocomial infections and reduces the spread of antimicrobial resistance
- contributes to the reduction of many neglected tropical diseases⁹.

⁴ <https://www.afro.who.int/fr/regional-director/speeches-messages/journee-mondiale-de-lhygiene-des-mains-2022>, consulted on 6 September 2022.

⁵ <https://www.unicef.fr/article/15-octobre-journee-mondiale-du-lavage-des-mains/>, M. Sanjay WIJESEKERA, UNICEF's Director Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programmes..

⁶ L'importance du lavage des mains, <https://naitreetgrandir.com/fr/sante/lavage-mains/#:~:text=Le%20lavage%20des%20mains%20permet,les%20risques%20d'infections%20respiratoires>, consulted on 4 October 2022.

⁷ <https://www.oc-cooperation.org/actualite/supports-de-sensibilisation-journee-mondiale-du-lavage-des-mains/>, consulted on 6 October 2022.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Idem*.

Noting further that the key elements of WHO *minimum standards for reducing child mortality rates related to waterborne diseases, which must meet the criteria of accessibility, availability, adaptability and quality*, constitute the following basic services:

- Drinking water, free of contamination, from an improved water source readily accessible on-premises or, if not, within a 30 minutes round trip
- Sanitation, including fixed or portable available, functional and/or private handwashing facilities with continuous water supply
- Hygiene, including activities such as both the *20-second handwashing method*¹⁰ and the use of hand sanitisers such as soap and hydro-alcoholic gels.

Noting that, according to the results of the behavioural assessment survey carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (INS) on households concerning the adoption of preventive measures from 1 to 28 February 2022, these households declared that they more often than not followed the handwashing method during the last seven days (76.2 per cent),¹¹

Pointing out further that according to these results, *“households access to drinking water has significantly improved, from 61 per cent in 2014, 62.5 per cent in 2016 and 79.0 per cent in 2018 to 79.4 per cent in 2020. Only 34 per cent of households have drinking water at home. For a little over half of the households (55 per cent), it takes 30 minutes or less to fetch drinking water, and for about one in ten households (11 per cent), it takes more than 30 minutes to look for, fetch and bring water back. However, these rates hide disparities across settings and regions of residence*¹²”,

Observing that when water is not readily available, people may decide that handwashing is not a priority,

The Commission commends Government efforts to promote handwashing by, inter alia:

- launching the “*École propre pour tous [Clean School for All]*” competition by the Ministry of Basic Education at *Mont-Fébé* in Yaoundé, on 20 April 2022, to promote best practices, including hygiene and sanitation
- raising awareness on the need and method of handwashing and providing sanitary materials such as taps, buckets and hydro-alcoholic gels as preventive measures against Covid-19
- the Ministry of Basic Education (MINEDUB) and UNICEF developed the national strategy for the promotion of drinking water supply, hygiene and sanitation in schools in Cameroon in 2017
- promoting MINEDUB’s “*Clean School for All*” slogan through signing Order No. 15/20 of 20 November 2020 on the application of the “*Clean School*” concept under that Ministry’s component: “*Assainissement scolaire et propreté des lieux d’aisance [School Sanitation and Cleanliness of Toilet Facilities]*”
- supplying drinking water to hospitals in 35 health districts in the Far North, North, Adamawa, East and Centre Regions, under a project funded by the Islamic Development Bank between 2018 and 2021¹³

¹⁰The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) approves the 20-second handwashing recommendation.

¹¹ Survey Results Report (1-28 February 2021), COVID-19 Socio-economic Impact Assessment Panels on Household Living Conditions in Cameroon, Phase 1, Household Component, NIS, EPICOID-19, March 2021, p. 6

¹² *Idem*

¹³ Cameroon Tribune article by Kimeng Hilton published on 24 August 2021

- the Government of Cameroon signed a memorandum of understanding with the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) for the sum of 3.6 billion FCFA on 1 July 2021 in Yaoundé, for drinking water supply in rural areas.

The Commission also commends initiatives by development partners, Civil Society Organisations and citizens, benefitting communities, and especially vulnerable groups in rural areas, such as:

- the collaboration between WHO, the African Union and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to develop a legal framework to institutionalise standards for infection control at the national level as well as in health facilities
- the project “*supporting girls’ retention in school by addressing their hygiene and sanitation needs*”, which received technical and financial support from UN Women, eBASE Africa and the Center for Advocacy in Gender Equality and Action for Development (CAGEAD) to implement a project of building gender-sensitive toilets in 15 schools in Cameroon, that is, five in Bertoua, five in Maroua and five in Bamenda. Particularly important was the handing over ceremony at Government Bilingual High School (GBHS), Bayelle, Bamenda, with the construction of a water point to ensure the effective use of the new toilet facility, the distribution of 600 sanitary pad kits to students, the provision of waste disposal buckets and an incinerator, on Thursday, 14 April 2022¹⁴
- the launching of operation “*Une école, des toilettes décentes [Decent Toilets in School]*” by the Cameroonian Association for Aid to Hygiene and the Integration of Young People in Communities (ACAHIJEC)¹⁵, an organisation that supports public authorities and development partners in promoting cleanliness in toilet facilities, raising awareness on good hygiene practices and promoting access to decent toilets.

However, the Commission remains concerned about:

- The low level of implementation of the regulatory framework that defines security, hygiene and sanitation rules for construction and safety at work, in Cameroon schools and universities, including:
 - o Decree No. 2008-0737-PM of 23 April 2008, Article 14(3), which states that *any building with separate dwellings must have a handwashing facility and a water discharge system... set up for cleaning purposes*”.
 - o Order No. 039/MTPS/IMT of 26 November 1984, Article 129 of Title IV relating to control measures and sanctions, which states “*the Labour Inspectors and the Medical Labour Inspectors within their jurisdiction, and the supervision of occupational safety officers of the National Social Insurance Fund, as being responsible for the application of the provisions set out*”.
 - o Decrees No. 2012/267 and 268 of 11 June 2012 to organise the Ministry of Secondary Education and the Ministry of Basic Education respectively, whose provisions clearly outline the missions of the *Sous-direction de la santé scolaire et des activités post et périscolaires* of the schools concerned, such as the coordination of health activities and the promotion of hygiene and sanitation in the school environment.

¹⁴ <https://cameroon.un.org/fr/182011-onufemmes-cameroun-soutient-la-gestion-de-lhygiene-menstruelle-au-sein-des-etablissements>, accessed on 7/9/2022

¹⁵ <http://www.ahahijec.com/fr/>, accessed on 7 September 2022

- the laxity of the Government in monitoring the application of measure 13 of the list of barrier measures, which the President of the Republic prescribed on 17 March 2020 and entered into force on Wednesday 18 March of the same year, whereby *“The public is urged to strictly observe the hygiene measures recommended by the World Health Organization... including regular hand washing with soap”*, etc.

The Commission urges the Government, public institutions, government and private schools and individuals to continue investing in facilities and materials for handwashing and thereby significantly reduce the risk of disease and health care costs.

The Commission recommends that regional and local authorities install and maintain handwashing points in public areas and raise awareness among communities of the importance of this essential gesture

The Commission especially recommends that Labour Inspectors and Medical Labour Inspectors in their areas of competence, as well as the health and safety control agents of the National Social Insurance Fund, according to the regulations in force, should:

- intensify awareness campaigns to ensure that all landlords, whether public or private, comply with the standards laid down by law in this sector
- carry out regular visits to ensure that hygiene measures are observed in workplaces and in places of public use
- desist from administrative tolerance and bring offenders to book.

The Commission also recommends that rivers and streams be protected from waste pollution, especially that of industrial and household, to reduce the risk of contamination in the community.

The Commission especially recommends that schools and universities introduce or increase handwashing facilities at the entrance and within their premises.

The Commission encourages teachers, pupils and students to wash their hands regularly with soap and water in schools, universities and colleges respectively.

The Commission recommends that handwashing awareness, developed under Covid-19, should continue beyond this pandemic so that handwashing becomes a sustainable habit in our society.

The Commission urges families to practise hand hygiene at home, to reduce the risk of transmitting bacterial diseases.

During the *14th Global Handwashing Day*, **the Commission is** particularly **underscoring** the need to raise awareness and educate communities on the importance of:

- doing the following correctly: *“wet your hands on running clean water, lather them up, rub them for 10 seconds and rinse them”*, all in 20 seconds

- a behaviour change in the following “no longer a conscious behaviour, geared towards a specific objective, but a subconscious behaviour conducted by reflex”¹⁶.

As for *the Commission*, *no effort will be spared* to continue promoting and protecting human rights, and especially the rights of children and vulnerable groups, through training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy, investigations, handling complaints, self-initiated investigations and the prevention of torture, through visits to all detention facilities, and the use of **its toll-free number 1523**.

Yaounde, the.....**13 OCT 2022**

Pour le Président
et par Ordre



Balega Gana Raphaël
Ministre Plénipotentiaire Hors Echelle

¹⁶ State of the World's Hand Hygiene – A Global Call to Action to Make Hand Hygiene a Priority in Policy and Practice, WHO/UNICEF, 2021, P.21.

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 concertation, de promotion et de protection des droits de l'homme. Elle fait également office du mécanisme national de prévention de torture
Created by law n° 2019/014 of 19th July 2019, the CHRC shall be an independent institution for consultation, monitoring, evaluation, dialogue, concerted action, promotion and protection in the domain of human rights. It shall also serve as the national Mechanism for the prevention of torture