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DE L'HOMME DU CAMEROUN**

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**CAMEROON HUMAN
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STATEMENT BY THE CAMEROON HUMAN COMMISSION RIGHTS TO MARK THE SEVENTH INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SIGN LANGUAGES

23 September 2024

Theme. – *Sign up for Sign Language Rights*

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (hereinafter referred to as “the Commission”), established by Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019, and implemented on 29 April 2021, following the swearing-in of its Commissioners before the Supreme Court sitting in Joint Benches,

Bearing in mind this mindset from Plato the philosopher, which posits, “*if we hadn't a voice or a tongue and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn't we try to make signs by moving our hands, our heads, and the rest of our body?*”¹,

Bearing in mind also that “*For millennia people with hearing impairments encountered marginalization because it was believed that language could only be learned by hearing the spoken word*”² and that “*vows of silence and humanist beliefs led European clerics to create new communication methods for the deaf and hard of hearing persons 500 years ago*”³,

Bearing in mind also that [in] 1755 [Charles-Michel de l'Épée], a French Catholic priest

established a more comprehensive method for educating the deaf, which culminated in the founding of the first school for deaf and dumb in Paris. [informed of the priest's project], students came to the institute from all over France [to learn sign language],

¹ See *Platon, Cratyle, Traduction Victor Cousin, Volume XI, Paris, Rey et Gravier Artyuiop, 1st edition, de 1822 à 1840*, 130 pp. spec. pp. 91-92, <https://remacle.org/bloodwolf/philosophes/platon/cousin/cratyle.htm>, accessed on 19 September 2024.

² See *National Geographic*, ‘How monks helped invent sign language’, <https://www.nationalgeographic.fr/histoire/2019/05/comment-les-moines-ont-contribue-a-l-invention-de-la-langue-des-signes>, accessed on 20 August 2024.

³ *Idem*.

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which they had used to communicate with at home. De l'Épée adapted these signs and added his own alphabet manual, resulting in the creation of a sign language dictionary, to ensure that sign language was rich enough to [express the thoughts of the deaf and dumb, incorporating into its dictionary] prepositions, conjunctions, and other grammatical elements⁴,

Recalling that during its First World Congress held in Roma (Italy) on 28 September 1958, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), established on 23 September 1951, initiated the first celebration of the World Deaf Day (WDD), which has been officially recognised by the United Nations Organisation (UNO) since 1959⁵,

Recalling also that the United Nations General Assembly by Resolution No. A/RES/72/161 adopted on 19 December 2017, proclaimed the celebration of the International Sign Languages Day (ISLD) on 23 September each year, beginning in 2018, to raise awareness of the importance of sign languages for the full realisation of the rights of deaf and hard of hearing people and to promote their social and economic integration,

Noting that the seventh paragraph of this Resolution recalls that "ensuring and promoting the full realization of all human rights relevant to matters of language [... is essential for] the full realization of human rights for deaf people,"

Noting equally that this Resolution highlights

that early access to sign language and services in sign language, including quality education available in sign language, is vital to the growth and development of the deaf individual and critical to the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals. It recognizes the importance of preserving sign languages as part of linguistic and cultural diversity [it emphasizes the principle of] "nothing about us without us", in terms of working with Deaf Communities⁶,

Noting also that beyond its practical use for communication, sign language serves as a gateway to a dynamic, inclusive and more diverse cultural and linguistic world, making it a manifestation of the fundamental right of every individual, including the deaf and hard of hearing, to communicate and participate fully in society⁷,

Welcoming the theme of the seventh International Sign Language Day entitled *Sign up for Sign Language Rights*, through which the WFD invites Governments, development partners as well as members of associations of deaf people and all other relevant actors to mobilise for the promotion of the use of sign languages at national, regional and universal levels⁸,

⁴ *Idem*.

⁵ See African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACnHPR) 'Press Release, International Sign language Day and World Deaf Day celebrations-23 and 28 September 2023' <https://achpr.au.int/fr/news/communiqué-de-presse/2023-10-02/celebrations-des-journées-internationale-des-langues-des>, accessed on 20 August 2024.

⁶ See United Nations, "International Day of Sign Languages 23 September", <https://www.un.org/fr/observances/sign-languages-day#:~:text=Dans%20l'objectif%20de%20promouvoir,internationale%20des%20langues%20des%20signes>, accessed on 16 August 2024.

⁷ See Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, 'International Sign Language Day 2024', <https://ccrw.org/fr/event/international-day-of-sign-languages-2024/>, accessed on 16 August 2024.

⁸ See World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), 'Concept Note: Challenge to World Leaders', <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ICqNaF-QZcwRz2lZ8DtP7KEMoUyzA1XF/view>, accessed 28 August 2024.

Highlighting that by definition,

[s]ign languages [which] are linguistic systems using vision to receive [information] and gestures to express [it], [are] languages used by communities [of persons with hearing impairment and deaf] around the world [which] may also be used to help people with oral communication difficulties or language disorders⁹,

Highlighting also the provisions of Section 2 of Law No. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the Protection and Promotion of Persons with Disabilities, which adopts the following definitions:

- [disability means] a limitation of the opportunities of a person with an impairment to fully take part in an activity in a given environment
- [a disabled person is] any person unable to ensure by himself all or part of the necessities of a normal individual or social life due to a physical or mental or not impairment congenital
- impairment [means] any loss or abnormality of a function or a psychological, physiological or anatomical structure,

Emphasizing further that the term “deaf” is any individual who perceives sounds inadequately to a sufficient or any extent. Similarly, the term “mute” denotes an individual who is unable to use speech. The term “deaf-mute” is used to describe an individual who is affected by both congenital or early-onset deafness preventing them from perceiving sounds, and a linguistic deficiency preventing them from expressing their thoughts orally,

Noting that, according to the *“Guidelines for Achieving Sign Language Rights”* published by the WFD in 2023,

“[I]linguistic rights are [...] civil rights [concerning the individual and collective right] to choose the language or languages for communication in private or public setting [...] Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, linguistic rights have been considered a component of the cultural rights of individuals”¹⁰,

Noting also that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted on 13 December 2006, signed on 1 October 2002 and ratified on 28 December 2021 by the State of Cameroon, clarifies the components of rights relating to sign language, in particular:

- the right to live in an inclusive society through the use of sign languages, in line with the provisions of Article 9(2)(e) of the said Convention
- the right of deaf persons to receive official information in sign language as per Article 21(b) and (e) on freedom of expression and opinion and access to information
- the right to equal treatment of children, including deaf children, in their family life, whose implementation requires from the State and its partners, including parents

⁹ Benoît Virole, *La langue des signes des sourds (Nature et structure)*, *Revue des Lettres de la SPF* n°40 of February 2018, pp.195-204, spé. p.195.

¹⁰ WFD, “Guidelines for Achieving Sign Language Rights”, 2023, pp 93, spec. 21.

- the adoption of measures to prevent abandonment, neglect and discrimination against children with disabilities by providing them with a wide range of information and services, as per the provisions of Article 23
- the creation of inclusive classes which "*suggests an education adapted to deaf children [using] sign language [and] involve families [...] to support and encourage the acquisition of sign language*"¹¹, while giving them the opportunity to become bilingual by mastering sign language and the French or one national language (at least in writing)
- the right to education of deaf persons, the realisation of which requires States Parties and their various partners to take appropriate measures, in particular those provided for in Article 24(3) of the Convention, to:
 - facilitate the learning of augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and the promotion of the linguistic identity of deaf community
 - ensure that the education of persons, and in particular children who are deaf is delivered in the most appropriate modes and means of communication
- the right to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, leisure and sports, as provided for in Article 30(4), which states that "*persons with disabilities shall be entitled [...] to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture*",

Emphasising that the normative and institutional framework relating to the promotion and protection of the deaf and hard of hearing has known little changes since the last celebration of this Day, and that the relevant provisions are referred to in the statement published to mark this Day in 2023¹²,

Emphasising also that among children suffering from hearing impairment, deaf children particularly do not have problems in learning or acquiring language, but rather they encounter problems in accessing sign language, which delays their acquisition. This is not due to hearing loss, but to political and sociological factors that impede their ability to access a sign language rich environment¹³,

The Commission commends Government's efforts to promote and protect the rights of individuals with hearing impairments, deafness and hearing loss, and to encourage their development in society, in particular through:

- the official launch by the Ministry of Social Affairs of the *We Ring the Bell* campaign to raise awareness of schooling for children with disabilities, with the

¹¹ Mireille Dedieu, *Les apports de la langue des signes dans la scolarisation des enfants sourds en France et en Suède*, April 2012, p 5.

¹² See Statement by the CHRC on the occasion of the celebration of the 6th International Sign Language Day, published on 25 September 2023., <http://www.cdhc.cm/admin/fichiers/Declarations2023-09-2508-18-00.pdf>, accessed on 1 August 2024.

¹³ FMS, Guidelines for Achieving Sign Language, p. 9.

theme of *inclusive education, play and learning, for families and communities of deaf people*, on 8 May 2024¹⁴

- the signing by the President of the Republic of Decrees No. 2024/132 and 2024/133 to appoint the Board Chairperson and the Director General of the Maroua Rehabilitation Centre for the Disabled (CRPH-Maroua) respectively, on 25 April 2024
- the organisation of the *Forum of Leaders of Deaf Organisations* by the Ministry of Social Affairs, on the theme *Organisations at the service of deaf people and commitment to reconciliation, solidarity and respect for our language, our culture and massive participation in the development of our deaf community and our country*, from 29 to 30 September 2023. The CHRC took part in this activity¹⁵
- the organisation, by the Ministry of Communication, of a consultation between certain public administrative bodies (such as MINAS) and representatives of civil society organisations (in particular Sightsavers Cameroon) and the media, on 13 September 2023, on the *adoption of a Cameroon sign language system*. At the end of this concertation it was agreed to temporarily maintain the use of the *French Sign Language (LSF)* and American Sign Language (ASL) on television,

The Commission is pleased by the official ceremony to award end of training attestations in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by the African Institute of Computer Sciences (IAI) to a 100 persons with disabilities in Mbalmayo, Nyong-and-So'o Division, Centre Region, on 13 October 2023. This ceremony formed part of the *one million youths, children and women by 2035 MIJEF project*¹⁶, which aims to provide training for women over the age of 25, youths between ages of 15 and 25 and children between ages of 6 and 14 throughout the national territory,

The Commission is, however, concerned that some discrepancies are still slowing down the fulfilment of services for people with hearing impairments, in particular:

- inaccessibility to some public and private areas
- difficult access to education and decent employment by the deaf and hard of hearing
- poor implementation of the provisions of national, regional and universal laws in force that protect them
- difficult access to information due to the inadequacy of communication tools and channels to their disability (telephone, radio, television as well as information and communication technologies)

¹⁴ See the Ministry of social affairs, « We Ring the Bell, Kick-off 2024 edition », <http://www.minas.cm/fr/actua/383-we-ring-the-bell,-kick-off-%C3%A9dition-2024.html>, accessed on 28 August 2024.

¹⁵ See Cameroon Tribune, « *Déficients auditifs : plaidoyer pour l'inclusion* », <https://www.cameroon-tribune.cm/article.html/60596/fr.html/deficients-auditifs-plaidoyer-pour-linclusion>, Accessed on 28 August 2024.

¹⁶ See Média terre, <https://www.mediaterre.org/afrique-centrale/actu.20231020090441.html>, assessed on 28 August 2024.

- lack of sign language interpretation facilities in public areas, including in public and private administrative bodies
- absence of sign language supports in awareness-raising and protection campaigns against the abusive exploitation of dumb, deaf or hard-of-hearing people, particularly against sexual abuse
- difficult access to information and education for deaf children in need of humanitarian assistance and living in environments not having sign language specialists or users, thus further affecting their security and well-being
- deaf people may be denied access to sign language education, thus hindering their understanding and reaction to information related to disaster and other humanitarian emergencies requiring new and more inclusive communication strategies
- failure to take into account the special needs of deaf people in aid programmes during humanitarian assistance situation,

The Commission is pleased that out of the 220 recommendations accepted by the State during the adoption of *the Report of Cameroon* on 26 March 2024 *after undergoing the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)*, four are in favour of people with disabilities. The Commission has distributed these recommendations to State structures as well as civil society organisations (CSOs), each as far as it is concerned as follows:

- the recommendation to ‘*improve the inclusion of [...] people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups* [including deaf and hard-of-hearing girls and, more generally, all children who are deaf, hard-of-hearing and cannot speak,] *in schools, in order to promote and ensure the respect of their fundamental rights*’, addressed to MINAS, to the Ministries of Women’s Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF), Basic Education (MINEDUB), Secondary Education (MINESEC), Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP), and CSOs
- the recommendation to “*strengthen the protection [...] of vulnerable people, such as people with disabilities* [including women, children, minorities and refugees]”, addressed to the Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic, the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), to MINAS, MINPROFF, MINEDUB, MINESEC and the Ministries of Justice (MINJUSTICE), Defence (MINDEF), Public Health (MINSANTE), the General Delegation of National Security (DGSN), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for its implementation
- the recommendation to “*strengthen the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities*”, addressed to MINJUSTICE, MINAS, and CSOs
- the recommendation to continue “*strengthening nationwide and international cooperation measures promoting a quality education for all*”, addressed to MINEFOP, MINESEC, MINEDUB, to the Ministries of External Relations (MINREX), Higher Education (MINESUP), Decentralisation and Local Development (MINDDEVEL) and Youths and Civic Education (MINJEC),

The Commission reiterates its recommendations formulated during the previous International Sign Language Days, in particular:

- *to the Government*, to
 - train teachers in the use of sign language, including opening a “*Sign Language Course*” in all the Higher Teachers Training College from the first year to *doctorate level*
 - increase training and recruitment opportunities - especially in large organisations - for deaf and hearing-impaired persons
 - systematically recruit a sign language interpreter in all public services to facilitate interviews or discussions with all deaf people
 - gradually integrate sign language interpreting in all mass communication strategies, and subsequently, in official communication,
- *to Managers of public and private television channels*, to:
 - provide a news slot in sign language at least in one daily television news programme and in other audio-visual documentaries
 - systematically introduce subtitles for deaf and hearing-impaired viewers in all other television programmes,
- *to CSOs, parents and the general public*, to be aware that sign language is not limited to gestures and imaginary facial expressions, but that it follows well-defined rules and codes, the ignorance of which is a characteristic of illiteracy,

The Commission recommends that the Government increase awareness-raising for the appropriation and implementation, by all, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the national legal instruments for the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities,

The Commission especially recommends to MINAS, MINCOM, MINSANTE, MINDDEVEL, MINJUSTICE, MINEDUB, MINESEC and MINEFOP each according to their sphere of competence to:

- step up rehabilitation and socio-economic integration initiatives for the deaf and hearing-impaired
- strengthen the capacity of persons with disabilities and the deaf and hard-of-hearing in particular, and their support organisations to participate in initiatives for sustainable development
- strengthen the training of doctors and nurses in inclusive healthcare, while ensuring that there is an inclusive unit in every hospital
- take new concrete measures to ensure equal access to information and inclusive quality education for all, especially for the deaf and hearing-impaired
- encourage training and recruitment for decent jobs - especially in big organisations
 - for the deaf and hard of hearing, particularly those with qualifications
- recruit sign language interpreters for public services and television channels

- further raise awareness of the need to respect the fundamental rights of deaf people, particularly as regards access to information in their national sign languages,

For its part, ***the Commission will spare no efforts*** to further promote and protect human rights with a particular focus on the rights of people with hearing impairment. This will be achieved through training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy, fact-finding missions and the handling of complaints and self-initiated investigations,

The Commission once more calls upon any person who is a victim or witness of Human rights violation and particularly violations of the rights of the hearing impaired, deaf or hard of hearing to contact the CHRC at its head office or regional and divisional branches, including via its **toll-free number: 1523** (free calls).

Useful address of CHRC

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Yaoundé,

22 SEPT 2024

