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**Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms**

## **Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa**

### **Report of the Secretary-General**

#### *Summary*

The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution [66/162](#) and presents the work of the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa from September 2011 to August 2013. The report provides an overview of the activities of the Centre that fall within the thematic priorities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights during that period: strengthening the rule of law and combating impunity; promoting economic, social and cultural rights; promoting democracy and good governance; combating discrimination; and strengthening national human rights institutions and cooperation with international and regional human rights mechanisms. The report also highlights outstanding challenges and opportunities for further engagement in the promotion and protection of human rights in the subregion.

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\* [A/68/150](#).



## I. Introduction

1. The Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa was established in 2001 at the request of the States members of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) pursuant to a resolution adopted by the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa at its fourth meeting, held in Yaoundé in April 1994, as well as to General Assembly resolutions [53/78 A](#) and [54/55 A](#).

2. The Centre operates under the auspices of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). As the Central Africa regional office for OHCHR, it covers the 10 States members of ECCAS (Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe) and Rwanda. OHCHR is represented in Chad and Rwanda by a Human Rights Adviser to each of the resident coordinators in those countries and in Burundi, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo through human rights components in the respective United Nations missions. Therefore, the Centre focuses its activities on those countries which do not have a human rights presence, namely Cameroon, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe.

3. The Centre is mandated to promote and protect human rights and democracy through advocacy and dialogue and the provision of technical assistance and advisory services to Governments, parliaments, national human rights institutions, civil society, the media and United Nations country teams. The Centre focuses on five thematic priorities of OHCHR: strengthening the rule of law and combating impunity, with a focus on the administration of justice and transitional justice; promoting economic, social and cultural rights; promoting democracy and good governance; combating discrimination; and strengthening national human rights institutions and cooperation with international and regional human rights mechanisms.

4. The implementation of these thematic priorities is enhanced by the effective dissemination by the Centre of human rights and democracy standards through its documentation centre, which increased its membership from about 5,000 in 2011 to over 7,000 by August 2013. At the same time, the production of human rights education materials, essential to furthering the human rights promotion and outreach activities of the Centre, had to be reduced owing to budget cuts.

5. The Centre has 11 staff members, 6 of whom work on substantive matters (a Regional Representative/Director, a Regional Adviser on Democracy, a Human Rights Officer, a Communications and Advocacy Associate Officer and two Programme Assistants) and 5 of whom provide support. A United Nations Volunteer, funded by the Government of France, has been working on the transitional justice programme. As part of a fellowship programme established in 2002, young professionals from the subregion provide significant support to the work of the Centre in five areas: human rights, democracy, documentation, administration and gender and women's human rights.

6. Cooperation with United Nations country teams of the subregion was sustained during the reporting period: joint activities were carried out in Burundi, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe. The Centre and the Special

Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Africa agreed to increase their collaboration. The Gabon-based United Nations Office for Central Africa provided support to the Centre by facilitating a workshop for journalists organized at the request of the Government and held in Libreville on 19 and 20 June 2013. The Centre and the Office are also planning to co-organize, before the end of 2013, a regional seminar to strengthen the capacities of journalists from 11 countries in the subregion in the fields of peace, peacebuilding and human rights. In addition, it is expected that the involvement of the Special Representative in building cooperation between the Office and ECCAS will help revive the 2008 memorandum of understanding between those two entities on combating trafficking. Cooperation with the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region is also being revived, through joint activities planned for late 2013 and a partnership agreement with the newly created Levy Mwanawasa Regional Centre for Democracy and Good Governance.

7. At the invitation of the Government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Cameroon from 30 June to 2 July 2013, which contributed to further raising the profile of the regional office among national and international stakeholders.

## **II. Key developments in the subregion**

8. The countries of particular focus of the Centre (Cameroon, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe) experienced relative peace during the reporting period. Conflict situations in neighbouring countries, however, continued to have an impact, in particular owing to the rising number of refugees. In particular, the situation in the Central African Republic generated a massive influx of refugees into Cameroon. In northern Nigeria, violence between Government forces and the extremist insurgent group Boko Haram pushed hundreds of Nigerians to flee to northern Cameroon, where the Cameroonian authorities fear the presence of insurgents among the refugees.

9. In June 2013, a summit on maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea was held in Yaoundé. Among the participants were Heads of State and Government of countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), ECCAS and the Commission of the Gulf of Guinea. ECCAS, ECOWAS and the Commission were tasked with establishing common frameworks, operational procedures, information-sharing mechanisms and a regional strategy, harmonizing their legal and institutional frameworks and organizing a conference on development and maritime security. In July 2013, the Heads of State of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community decided to ease the movement of their countries' citizens by making the subregion visa-free starting in January 2014.

10. During the period under review, elections were held in Cameroon, the Congo and Equatorial Guinea. Cameroon held its first senatorial elections in April 2013; the Congo and Equatorial Guinea held municipal, parliamentary and first senatorial elections in May 2013, following constitutional changes approved by referendum in November 2011. In all cases, the ruling parties won the elections by a large margin. In Cameroon, the ruling party obtained 80 per cent of Senate seats. In the Congo, efforts started to be made to update the electoral lists, which had been in place since 2001. In Equatorial Guinea, there were allegations of arbitrary arrests and detention

of opposition members, as well as threats to the enjoyment of freedom of expression and association, during the electoral process. In 2012, in Sao Tome and Principe, a political crisis that followed a no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister was resolved peacefully, with the Government handing power over to the opposition.

11. Despite significant efforts to fight corruption and the misuse of public funds, including through the establishment, in Cameroon, of a special criminal court, concerns remain as to the impartiality of judicial proceedings on these matters. While some proceedings were unjustifiably slow, others involved speedy and questionable trials, raising suspicion of political influence and manipulation of judicial authorities.

### **III. Thematic priorities and achievements**

#### **A. Strengthening the rule of law and combating impunity**

12. Important challenges persist with regard to the administration of justice in all countries of the subregion. The slowness of judicial processes, the excessive length of pretrial detention and the lack of alternatives to detention as punitive measures have caused serious congestion in prisons in Cameroon, Chad, the Congo and Gabon. The lack of judicial independence and the widespread corruption of law enforcement and judicial personnel have fostered impunity and undermined public confidence in the formal legal system. Many inhabitants of remote or rural areas, including indigenous peoples, are denied access to justice owing to the inadequate geographical distribution of judicial structures. Law enforcement agencies, the judiciary and prison administrations are underfunded and lack human and material resources to carry out their duties efficiently and in accordance with human rights norms and standards. A lack of awareness or disregard for human rights standards, including by prison personnel, have led to arbitrary arrests and detention, the ill-treatment of detainees and poor prison conditions. With regard to the death penalty, only one country of the subregion (Rwanda) has ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty. That said, a moratorium on the use of the death penalty exists informally in almost all the other countries of the subregion and no executions have been carried out in recent years.

13. The Centre has continued to focus its activities on building the institutional capacity of law enforcement, prison administration and judicial personnel in applying human rights standards. In Cameroon, in collaboration with the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Centre provided human rights training to judicial police and gendarmerie officers at the judicial police training centre in Yaoundé. That training programme has been replicated in all priority countries of the subregion, in particular in Gabon. Awareness-raising activities for police and gendarmerie officers were carried out in Cameroon, the Congo and Gabon and for penitentiary personnel in Cameroon with a view to addressing the issue of torture in detention.

14. In Cameroon, to ensure improved compliance with human rights norms in places of detention, the Centre facilitated the drafting and adoption of a code of conduct with a solid human rights base for penitentiary personnel. The code is

awaiting promulgation by the President of Cameroon in the form of a decree. Moreover, training for prison personnel has to date benefited some 70 officials in two regions of the country (North-West and Littoral).

15. In November 2012, the Centre organized a training programme on human rights for magistrates and judges of the subregion, with a focus on cases of arrest and detention. This pioneering experience in Cameroon has contributed to raising awareness of human rights among officials of the judiciary; the introduction of such training sessions in other countries has been highly encouraging. In Gabon, magistrates and judges who acknowledged that human rights concerns in the administration of justice had been overlooked, decided to set up an exchange forum under the leadership of the national human rights institution of Gabon to review implementation of the recommendations arising from trainings organized and delivered by the Centre.

16. In partnership with the Governments of France and Switzerland, the Centre built upon the two regional conferences it had organized in Yaoundé, held in 2006 (on the issues and challenges of transitional justice in Francophone Africa) and 2009 (on transitional justice as a path towards reconciliation and the construction of a durable peace). The third such regional conference (on improving the effectiveness of transitional justice processes by thinking of strategies best suited to local realities) was held in Yaoundé in April 2013. An online platform on transitional justice for experts from Francophone countries was launched during the event.

## **B. Promotion of economic, social and cultural rights**

17. The standard of living in the countries of the subregion is still low and there is significant disparity between people living in rural and urban areas and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Access to clean and potable water, sufficient food, adequate shelter, health care, education and other basic services in rural areas is extremely limited. While all countries of the subregion, with the exception of Sao Tome and Principe, are States parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, none has yet ratified the Optional Protocol to that Covenant, which allows for the justiciability of economic, social and cultural rights.

18. During the reporting period, some encouraging initiatives and developments were taken to promote economic and social rights. For example, thousands of public housing units were being constructed (10,000 in N'Djamena and 30,000 in Yaoundé). Public authorities in the subregion have also actively promoted access to free primary education.

19. While most countries of the subregion have significant natural resources, such as timber and minerals, the impact of the exploitation of such resources in terms of improving people's economic, social and cultural rights has been insignificant. On the contrary, large mineral and forest exploitation contracts signed between Governments and multinational companies have at times undermined the rights of local communities to property, housing or acceptable standards of living. The discovery and exploitation of oil resources in Cameroon, for instance, has not benefited the poor segments of the population. During his visit to Cameroon in July 2012, the Special Rapporteur on the right to food warned that despite the increasing revenues drawn from the extensive use of natural resources, food security indicators were on red alert. During her visit, the United Nations High Commissioner for

Human Rights urged the Cameroonian authorities to ensure that the people would benefit from the resources of the country and that those resources would be exploited in a transparent and equitable way.

20. The Centre focused its work on economic, social and cultural rights in the subregion on promoting human rights-based approaches to State planning and budgeting processes. A capacity-building activity for Government stakeholders was held in N'Djamena from 13 to 16 November 2012. Thirty staff from ministries in charge of planning participated in this event. Follow-up activities will be necessary to ensure that human rights focal points effectively participate in planning processes in their respective ministries.

### **C. Promotion of democracy and good governance**

21. Further efforts need to be undertaken to uphold the independence of State institutions in the subregion. In Cameroon, for instance, the President has the right to appoint 30 of the 100 members of the Senate. Countries of the subregion lack the checks and balances necessary for democracy, and the ability of parliaments to oversee and review the executive branch needs to be strengthened. During the reporting period, questions were raised regarding the independence, accountability and transparency of electoral processes in Cameroon, the Congo and Equatorial Guinea. This situation leads to low levels of confidence in State institutions and low voter turnout during electoral processes. Moreover, official figures relating to voter turnout and the final results of elections remain questionable.

22. The participation of women, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities in politics and electoral processes remains low. While it is heartening that women's representation in all sectors has increased, disparities persist concerning the levels they attain. The participation of indigenous peoples in politics and electoral processes remains a challenge owing to the marginalization of indigenous people and the fact that they are often located in remote areas. The Centre has continued to focus its activities on human rights and elections, with an emphasis on promoting the participation of women, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples in politics and electoral processes. The Centre is advocating for greater inclusion of marginalized groups during the forthcoming process for the review of electoral lists in the Congo and Gabon, and has urged the electoral management bodies to send teams to remote indigenous communities and to go door to door to identify and register persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples.

23. Since 2011, civil society entities, including political parties, media professionals and specific groups such as persons with disabilities, women and indigenous peoples, have received extensive training on human rights and elections, with the objective of raising awareness about the importance of their participation. The Centre is a partner in a project entitled "Inclusive society for persons with disabilities", which aims to increase the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral processes in Cameroon and includes awareness-raising activities of the electoral management body. Judicial bodies in charge of electoral disputes were also sensitized and trained on relevant human rights issues.

24. The media has an important responsibility in contributing to peaceful electoral processes. Since 2011, the Centre has organized seven capacity-building activities for media professionals in four countries of the subregion (Burundi, Cameroon,

Congo and Gabon), focusing on their role in the promotion and protection of human rights in electoral periods, as well as on ethics and deontology. The vast electronic network of human rights journalists in the subregion has significantly improved the media approach to and treatment of human rights issues related to elections. National networks of human rights journalists exist in Cameroon, the Congo and Gabon.

25. The Centre is working to develop a forum in the subregion for sharing best practices and setting up an award for best article in the field of election-related human rights promotion and protection.

26. During the reporting period, human rights defenders in the subregion faced harassment and threats, including from justice and law enforcement agents. In July 2013, a prominent defender of the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Cameroon was found dead in Yaoundé. Journalists continued to be arrested and detained as a result of their work and media outlets were suspended for political reasons. Foundation Radio was suspended because of a political interview it aired on the Southern Cameroons National Council. In the Congo, two newspapers and their publishers were charged with spreading false information and defamation. In Chad, the Director of *N'Djamena bi-hebdo* was arrested and detained in April and May 2013 on charges of spreading false information on the Government. A radio station in Doba City, Chad, was suspended on grounds of transmitting information considered injurious to the Government.

27. During her visit to Cameroon, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights drew the attention of the Government to its responsibilities towards journalists and human rights defenders. She encouraged the Government to consolidate its good record by enabling a conducive environment for the work of journalists and human rights defenders and by decriminalizing media offences.

#### **D. Elimination of discrimination**

28. Women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, migrant workers and members of their family, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons continue to be particularly affected by discrimination in all countries of the subregion.

##### **Migrant workers and their families**

29. Migrant workers continue to face restrictions on their movements and discrimination in accessing employment and basic services. During the period under review, Equatorial Guinea carried out mass expulsions of migrants from West and Central African countries who had been attracted to Equatorial Guinea by the boom in the oil industry and the related demand for skilled and unskilled labour. Some of the expulsions were preceded by arrests and detentions based on violations of national immigration laws.

30. To date, no country of the subregion has ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Some Governments argue that, migration being a global inter-State issue, legislation on that matter requires reciprocity from all States to be effective. The Government of Cameroon, subsequent to the national follow-up workshop, held in Yaoundé in 2011, to the subregional dialogue on migration and human rights,

expressed the political will to ratify the Convention. The Government has yet to take action on the matter owing to the aforementioned concerns.

31. The Centre, together with the International Labour Organization, has continued to advocate for the ratification of the Convention in all countries of the subregion. The decision taken by the Heads of States of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community to open up their countries' borders from January 2014, thereby allowing the free movement of persons within the Central Africa region, will hopefully be conducive to ratification.

### **Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons**

32. Discrimination based on sexual orientation remains a serious concern. During the reporting period, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons continued to suffer from arbitrary arrests and detention, as well as threats from individuals. Positions disseminated by some religious authorities fuelled public anger against homosexuals in particular, some of whom had to go into hiding for security. In Cameroon, State authorities threatened to toughen sanctions against homosexuals. The penal code criminalizes homosexuality, which is currently punishable by three years' imprisonment. The authorities are considering amending the code to extend the length of imprisonment to five years. In this regard, the High Commissioner urged the Government of Cameroon, during her visit to the country, to not toughen existing penalties for homosexuality and enhance prevention and protection measures to fight stigmatization and violence.

33. In Cameroon, human rights defenders working on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have also been threatened. In July 2013, one such defender, Eric Ohena Lembembe, was found dead in his home in Yaoundé, his body bearing signs of torture. Non-governmental organizations promoting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons have been targeted and some have had their offices burned down or broken into. The Centre is not aware of any serious investigation being conducted into these cases. The Centre's advocacy with the Government concerning its international obligations, to prevent and address discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons has been met with resistance from the authorities, who refer to "public morals".

### **Indigenous peoples**

34. Indigenous peoples in the subregion have suffered continued discrimination, especially with regard to access to land and property, basic social amenities and political participation. The activities of multinational companies involved in natural resource exploitation severely affect the lives of indigenous peoples. Over the past two years, however, the situation has gradually improved. The United Nations Indigenous Peoples' Partnership project, in which Cameroon and the Congo are involved, has contributed to raising awareness about the situation of indigenous peoples. The efforts made by the Governments of Cameroon and the Congo to identify concerned communities, define their status and devise possible measures to ensure the full realization of the rights of indigenous peoples have been encouraging, even if differences persist as to the exact definition of indigenous peoples. Cameroon launched a study on the identification of indigenous peoples in the country in December 2011, the second phase of which will begin soon. The study aims at ascertaining whether identified communities fulfil the criteria for

qualification as indigenous peoples in the light of regional and international standards. The Congo is being encouraged to push forward with the implementation of its pioneering law on the promotion and protection of indigenous populations, adopted in 2011. The Centre and United Nations partners will work towards monitoring its implementation.

35. The Centre has organized national consultations and workshops on the rights of indigenous peoples in the subregion. It has also disseminated the text of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and supported Government-led activities to observe the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, on 9 August each year. The advocacy and capacity-building activities of the Centre with the election management bodies have contributed to fostering the political participation of indigenous peoples through extended voter registration campaigns in remote localities where indigenous peoples reside.

### **Women**

36. Women continue to face discrimination throughout the subregion and remain significantly underrepresented in political office. Following the Senate elections in April 2013 in Cameroon, for instance, only 20 women were elected and nominated to the upper house, which has 100 members. Some progress was recorded, however, in the promotion of women's right to political participation in some countries of the subregion. In Cameroon, at least 30 per cent of the members of the House of Representatives are now women. For the 2013 senatorial elections, the electoral management body made enlisting women candidates a precondition for screening political party candidatures. According to the body, the number of eligible female voters has increased in Cameroon.

37. In Cameroon, there have been concerns about delays in the adoption of the family code, which has been pending for nearly 20 years. According to civil society stakeholders and the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family, the code is a landmark document that, once adopted, will contribute significantly to promoting and protecting the rights of women and ending discrimination, violence and some harmful traditional practices. The code integrates the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. The Centre has offered to provide technical support to the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family towards the realization of this objective.

38. With regard to trafficking in human beings, the situation in the subregion remained worrying during the reporting period. Girls were trafficked for prostitution, especially to countries in West Africa, but also to countries in Europe. No significant efforts were made at the subregional level to combat such trafficking and the few efforts made at the national level lacked effectiveness, in part because of a lack of coordination and the inadequate implementation of existing legal frameworks. The Centre has carried out capacity-building activities with law enforcement and administration of justice officials in countries of the subregion on the question of trafficking.

39. Sexual violence continued to be widespread and to be used as a weapon to terrorize local communities in countries affected by conflict, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. There were documented reports of mass rape in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In

the Central African Republic, the Séléka coalition was reportedly engaged in sexual violence on a large scale during its offensive on Bangui in December 2012. To avoid duplicating the work done by other OHCHR representatives, the Centre did not focus on this area during the reporting period. However, sexual and gender-based violence has been included in the planning process for the next four years, as part of the anti-discrimination programme of the Centre.

40. Throughout the subregion, the Centre worked with civil society organizations, the United Nations and other partners to promote the civil and political rights of women through capacity-building, advocacy and information dissemination.

## **E. Strengthening national human rights institutions and cooperation with international and regional human rights mechanisms**

### **National human rights institutions**

41. All the States in the subregion except Sao Tome and Principe have established national human rights institutions, three of which (Burundi, Cameroon and Rwanda) have been accredited with A status by the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. National human rights institutions are important actors and partners of the Centre in the promotion and protection of human rights, even though several factors, such as weak institutional capacity, inadequate resources and limited Government support, hinder the effective functioning of these institutions, in particular in the Congo, Gabon, Guinea and Equatorial Guinea. Some national human rights institutions lack the capacity or political independence to investigate allegations and follow up complaints. These gaps have affected efforts to comply with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (Paris Principles) and protect human rights at the national level.

42. The Centre organized a series of capacity-building workshops for national human rights institutions at the subregional and national levels to build the skills of the members and personnel of such institutions in monitoring the human rights situation in their respective countries and to document human rights violations and make recommendations for corrective actions. Between November 2011 and July 2012, four subregional workshops were held to strengthen the capacities of national human rights institutions on economic, social and cultural rights, human rights monitoring and reporting, and the protection of human rights through effective follow-up and handling of complaints. These workshops, held in Yaoundé, Brazzaville, Bujumbura and Libreville, resulted in the setting up of a network of Central African national human rights institutions that provides a platform to exchange best practices. The Centre has also involved national human rights institutions as partners and resources in countries where it organizes awareness-raising or capacity-building activities, and has provided them with relevant documentation. The Centre has regularly engaged with national human rights institutions of the subregion by referring cases of alleged human rights violations for their consideration and following up to ensure that action was taken.

**Universal periodic review**

43. All States of the subregion participated in the universal periodic review process and are, to varying degrees, engaged in following up on the recommendations. Gabon and Cameroon were reviewed during the second cycle of the review, in 2012 and 2013 respectively. In a welcome move, Cameroon, the Congo and Sao Tome and Principe have already established national follow-up mechanisms and adopted road maps to address all the recommendations emanating from international and regional human rights mechanisms, including treaty bodies, special procedures and universal periodic review recommendations. Equatorial Guinea and Gabon are moving in the same direction, albeit more slowly. The universal periodic review engagement has provided important entry points to address pending and sensitive human rights issues at the national level throughout the subregion, and technical and financial partners' support in the implementation of the universal periodic review follow-up remains high. The Centre has advocated for national human rights institutions, civil society organizations and United Nations country teams to engage actively in the universal periodic review follow-up processes. During her visit to Cameroon, the High Commissioner expressed satisfaction at the Government's participation in the second cycle of the review and encouraged it to implement and communicate, before the twenty-fourth session of the Human Rights Council, on the implementation of the 171 recommendations it had received.

**Treaty body reporting obligations**

44. Efforts have also been made by countries of the subregion to meet their treaty body reporting obligations. The Centre trained the committees in charge of reporting to treaty bodies and in the context of the universal periodic review in Cameroon, the Congo and Gabon during the period under review. Cameroon pledged to the High Commissioner that it would submit all overdue reports, with technical assistance from the Centre.

**Special procedures**

45. Engagement with special procedures mandate holders has been encouraging. The Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, visited Gabon in May 2012, and the Special Rapporteur on the right to food visited Cameroon in July of the same year. The latter made important recommendations, underlining in particular the need for adequate legislative reforms to guarantee progress in the realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

46. The Centre continued to advocate for Cameroon, Chad, the Congo and Gabon to extend open invitations to special procedures mandate holders. Cameroon has extended invitations to four: the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation; and the Independent Expert on minority issues. It is expected that some of the visits will take place in 2013 and 2014. In June 2012, the Government of Chad extended a standing invitation to special procedures mandate holders following the visit of the Deputy High Commissioner for human rights to the country. The Centre will continue to facilitate the visits of special procedures mandate holders in countries of the subregion. During her visit to Cameroon, the High Commissioner commended the Government for the invitations

already extended to the four mandate holders mentioned above and encouraged it to consider issuing a standing invitation to all mandate holders.

#### **Harmonization of national laws with international human rights standards**

47. In Cameroon, efforts have been made to harmonize national laws with international human rights standards. The penal code and the civil code are currently being revised. In Gabon, the process of aligning national legislation with international human rights standards remained slow. No action has been taken to integrate the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified in 2008, into domestic law.

#### **Regional human rights mechanisms**

48. The Centre has included regional human rights mechanisms, notably African human rights instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, in its advocacy work. To date, only three countries of the subregion have ratified the Charter: Cameroon, Chad and Rwanda.

49. The Centre actively cooperated with and facilitated the visits of special procedures mandate holders of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2012 and 2013. Joint activities were undertaken with the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in Africa and the Chair of the African Commission Expert Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Cooperation with the African Rehabilitation Institute, based in Harare, furthered the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities and resulted in a firm commitment from Congolese authorities to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

### **IV. Challenges faced by the Centre**

50. The cooperation of some States with the Centre was not always forthcoming. In Equatorial Guinea, for instance, planned activities aimed at promoting democracy and governance were cancelled because the Centre did not receive authorization from the Government. Countries of the subregion are called upon to further facilitate and constructively engage with the Centre, whose mandate they decided upon.

51. National human rights institutions actively participated in activities organized by the Centre in countries of the subregion. However, they were unable to efficiently follow up on these activities at the national level owing to a lack of adequate financial, material and human resources. Governments should guarantee the independence of national human rights institutions, as well as the means to carry out their mandate efficiently.

52. The low level of ratification of international and regional human rights instruments is an important challenge, as it limits the level of State commitment to further enhancing the protection and promotion of human rights. The Centre will continue therefore to prioritize advocacy for the ratification of human rights instruments and the setting up of adequate implementation mechanisms at the national level.

## V. Conclusion and opportunities for future engagement

53. During the period under review, the Centre enjoyed improved cooperation from most countries of the subregion, which enabled it to carry out more activities. Cooperation is gradually tilting towards States requesting activities rather than the Centre proposing activities. Several countries sought the support of the Centre, including for the purpose of meeting their reporting obligations and building the capacity of law enforcement and judicial personnel. The commitment of the ministries of justice of Cameroon, the Congo, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe, in particular, is reflected in the number of capacity-building activities organized for justice and law enforcement professionals in these countries. It is foreseen that the Centre will be increasingly asked to organize capacity-building activities for law enforcement and judicial personnel in the following years. The Centre will strive to uphold and build upon this cooperation and to meet the growing requests for technical assistance.

54. With regard to transitional justice, the Centre will continue to support the sharing of best practices in the subregion and provide assistance to countries concerned (Burundi, Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo) in developing national strategies on transitional justice.

55. The Centre has developed significant experience on human rights and elections, which it will build on during the forthcoming electoral processes, with a particular focus on increasing the participation of women, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples.

56. The Centre has engaged with national human rights institutions, as privileged partners in the promotion and protection of human rights in the subregion. Dialogue and cooperation have been fruitful and will be enhanced further by the continued support of the Centre to national human rights institutions to ensure their effective compliance with the Paris Principles, including through the newly established regional network of national human rights institutions. Cameroon will be reviewed by the International Coordination Committee of National Human Rights Institutions during the first half of 2015, while Burundi will be reviewed during the second half of 2017. There could be further applications for review from newly created national human rights institutions in the subregion, like those of Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Therefore, the capacity of these institutions should be consolidated ahead of the review process.

57. The Centre intends to build on opportunities for enhanced cooperation with regional organizations, including the Executive Secretariat of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, ECCAS, the African Union and, especially, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. The Centre will continue to advocate for the ratification of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and other regional and international human rights treaties.

58. The Centre has also benefited from a fruitful collaboration with the United Nations Office for Central Africa, notably through the creation of new entry points to engage in activities to promote democracy and human rights standards in Equatorial Guinea, where cooperation had been challenging.

**59. As the visibility of the Centre has increased, requests for assistance have expanded and are expected to grow in the coming years. In order to fulfil its mandate and meet these requests, it will be important to allocate additional financial resources to the Centre.**

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