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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 pursuant to General Assembly resolution [74/162](#). It serves to outline the work of the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa from 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2021. It also provides a description of the challenges faced by the Centre and opportunities for further engagement in the subregion.

* [A/76/150](#).



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 of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, adopted in April 1994, and to General Assembly resolutions [53/78 A](#) and [54/55 A](#).
2. The Centre functions as the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), covering 10 States members of ECCAS: Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda, and Sao Tome and Principe.
3. In accordance with the OHCHR mandate, established pursuant to General Assembly resolution [48/141](#), the Centre works for the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy through advocacy, dialogue and the provision of technical assistance and advisory services. The beneficiaries are Governments, parliaments, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations, the media, United Nations country teams and other partners.
4. The focus of the report is on the activities of the Centre carried out between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2021 in Burundi, Cameroon, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sao Tome and Principe. The report does not cover the other countries of the subregion as they have dedicated United Nations human rights field presences.
5. Various factors affected the Centre's activities during the reporting period, most notably the global effects of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the capacity of OHCHR to deliver on some of its mandate. The liquidity crisis of the United Nations, resulting in the freeze of the regular budget, had an impact on the Centre's staffing funded mainly from the regular budget. The impact of the pandemic and the budgetary crisis on travel restrictions further hindered the Centre from conducting its activities in all relevant countries.
6. Owing to restrictions on direct interactions and missions in the subregion, the Centre adapted to the new way of working by conducting its activities through a remote approach or online platforms.
7. The Centre requires additional resources in order to more effectively implement its mandate in a subregion that is marred by political and social instability, the proliferation of armed separatist groups of various natures, significant governance deficiencies and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other issues. Strengthening the capacity of the Centre remains critical to efforts to effectively promote human rights and the rule of law. Both human rights and the rule of law constitute the backbone of sustainable peace and development and contribute to the prevention of further conflicts and violent extremism in Central Africa. While partnership with Governments, regional, national and international organizations and other United Nations system entities is a key element in this regard, it is essential that Member States ensure sustainable and adequate funding for the Centre through the regular budget as a prerequisite for increased impact and efficiency.

II. Major political, security and social context affecting human rights in the subregion

8. Elections in Burundi, Cameroon, the Congo, and Sao Tome and Principe shaped the political context in the subregion in 2020 and 2021. In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, countries held elections through in-person voting while putting in place preventive measures. Electoral and political tensions in some countries (Burundi, Cameroon), associated with the effects of the COVID-19 related measures, placed considerable constraints on the ability of people to participate. The Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire in order to fight the pandemic was heeded in some instances, but organized violence and activities by armed groups in some countries in the subregion continued unabated.

A. Political developments

9. In Burundi, the newly elected President, Évariste Ndayishimiye, pledged six main priorities for his presidency: (a) good governance; (b) public health; (c) agriculture and cattle breeding; (d) addressing youth unemployment; (e) social protection for pensioners; and (f) peace and reconciliation. The election by which he replaced the former President, Pierre Nkurunziza,¹ whose third term in office from 2015 to 2020 was marred by an acute sociopolitical crisis, took place without independent observation and reportedly in an atmosphere of intolerance, intimidation and repression of the reduced segment of the opposition that was allowed to participate. Attempts by the main opposition party, Agathon Rwasa's Congrès national pour la liberté, to challenge the credibility and the results of the presidential election, granting overwhelming victory to the ruling party (Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-forces de défense de la démocratie) were quickly dismissed. Following the elections and in an effort to end the country's international isolation, the Government actively engaged with the international community, including with the European Union, in discussions aimed at gradually resuming cooperation, which had been suspended in 2016. On 4 December 2020, the Security Council removed the item entitled "The situation of Burundi" from its agenda.

10. Human rights organizations have suggested that initiatives by international partners to restore cooperation with the Government of Burundi were premature and argued that there was a need first to address outstanding issues² that the Government had failed or was unwilling to tackle, including impunity and persisting human rights violations and abuses. A recent development that underscored those concerns was the issuance on 2 February 2021 of a Supreme Court judgment dated 23 June 2020,³ according to which a group of 34 exiled defendants, including 12 human rights defenders and journalists as well as political opponents, were convicted for their alleged involvement in the failed coup attempt of May 2015. They did not have legal representation and were not allowed to appeal the judgment from abroad, denying them the right to a fair trial.

¹ The sudden demise of the outgoing President, Pierre Nkurunziza on 9 June 2020, prompted the earlier swearing-in of the President-elect, Évariste Ndayishimiye, on 18 June 2020.

² Open letter by a dozen of non-governmental organizations to the European Union, available at: www.hrw.org/fr/news/2021/06/21/lue-devrait-honorer-ses-engagements-en-faveur-des-droits-humains-au-burundi. See also Human Rights Watch, "Burundi: entrenched repression of civil society", in which Human Rights Watch stated: "the European Union should not accept token gestures and promises of change at the expense of accountability and addressing the root causes of the country's human rights crisis."

³ Decision RPS 100 of 23 June 2020 of the Burundian Supreme Court.

11. In Cameroon, from 30 September to 4 October 2019, the President, Paul Biya, convened a national dialogue in Yaoundé that focused primarily on the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions. Participants from various sectors of Cameroonian society attended the dialogue, with the exception of secessionist leaders and members of the opposition party of the former presidential candidate, Maurice Kamto, some of whom were detained at the time. Key outcomes⁴ of the national dialogue included recommendations for a special status for the North-West and South-West Regions, the creation of regional councils and the House of Chiefs, the authorization of dual citizenship and representation of the diaspora in the National Assembly, the adoption of measures to promote bilingualism and the designation of mediators to engage in dialogue with members of the diaspora. The Prime Minister, Joseph Dion Ngute, promised to reopen schools and ensure the resumption of socioeconomic activities as well as the return of refugees and internally displaced persons in both regions.

12. On 6 December 2020, Cameroon held its first-ever regional elections, after municipal and legislative elections held on 9 February 2020. The elections took place in a tense security context, amid calls for a boycott by opposition political parties until a political solution to the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions could be found, threats and attacks on candidates, including kidnappings by separatist fighters aimed at disrupting the process. Despite the fragile situation, the new institutions were installed and are functioning, including the regional counsellors.

13. On 21 March 2021, the Congo held its presidential election amid a strong presence of security forces around polling centres and other areas, such as the national television station and near the police academy in Brazzaville as well as in Pointe Noire, Niari, and the northern part of the country. The heightened security measures were consistent with reports of a climate of intimidation that characterized the electoral process, with incidents of arbitrary arrests and detention of some civil society actors and Internet shutdowns. The leader of the parliamentary opposition and others boycotted the election in protest of what they considered to be an unfair electoral process and other issues undermining the credibility of the elections, including failure to reform the electoral code. Of the seven presidential candidates, the incumbent, Denis Sassou Nguesso, won with over 88 per cent of votes, while some of the opposition figures, including Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and André Okombi Salissa, remained in detention. The main opposition presidential candidate, Guy Parfait Kolélas, who subsequently succumbed to COVID-19, received 7.96 per cent of the votes. Voter turnout was reported at 67.55 per cent, roughly comparable to the 2016 turnout. Petitions filed by various political actors to the Constitutional Court for irregularities were dismissed.

14. Sao Tome and Principe organized its presidential elections on 18 July 2021 in a polarized political context. The first round was held without major incident. However, heightened security and an increase in political rallies and protests are likely ahead of the second-round run-off between the two presidential contenders on 8 August.

15. On 15 December 2020, the National Assembly approved a controversial draft electoral reform law (regarding the composition of the Electoral Commission), tabled by the Partido de Convergência Democrática led by the Speaker of the National Assembly and supported by its allies in the ruling parliamentary coalition. The opposition party Acção Democrática Independente opposed the bill on the grounds that it was intended solely to bar the former Prime Minister, Patrice Trovoada, from running in the 2021 presidential election. On 5 January 2021, the President, Evaristo do Espírito Santo Carvalho, vetoed the bill, on the basis that it was being proposed

⁴ See www.jeuneafrique.com/838762/politique/cameroun-le-grand-dialogue-national-sacheve-avec-un-statut-special-pour-les-regions-anglophones/.

within six months of the presidential elections and that there was a need for a broad national dialogue on electoral reform. The national dialogue is likely to be held after the election as several stakeholders have called for United Nations support to facilitate the dialogue between the political actors in order to help to forge national reconciliation.

16. In Gabon, the authorities focused on addressing the socioeconomic impact of the health and oil crises by putting in place measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and limiting its impact on the economy of the country, while taking steps to improve public governance and fight corruption. Unnecessary and excessive use of force by security forces in the implementation of the measures triggered a large protest dubbed “le mouvement des casseroles”, which allegedly led to the deaths of two individuals and several being wounded.⁵

17. On 29 December 2020, the Gabonese Parliament adopted a new Constitution, promulgated on 8 January 2021. According to the new Constitution, a triumvirate of the Presidents of the National Assembly and Senate and the Minister of Defence would collectively assume presidential powers during an interim period of vacancy or temporary incapacity at the presidency. Moreover, the Constitution secured for a former Head of State stronger immunity from judicial proceedings for crimes committed during his or her tenure. Segments of the opposition and civil society criticized the absence of consultations during the process.⁶

18. In Equatorial Guinea, the President, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, in his capacity as founding President of the ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea, chaired a coordination meeting with leaders of political parties on 3 June 2021 to discuss the organization of the upcoming legislative/municipal elections, in an effort to create an environment conducive to a participatory and fair electoral process. The dates have yet to be decided.

B. Security developments and trends

19. During the period under review, security incidents mostly affected Burundi and Cameroon. During 2020 and the first half of 2021, the relatively calm security situation in Burundi was disrupted by episodes of violent incidents with a negative impact on human rights. Increased armed attacks by armed groups and clashes with the Burundian security forces have been documented by OHCHR since August 2020 in several provinces across the country. Most of the attacks targeted the security forces, although civilians were also attacked, and were compounded by punitive actions taken by the security forces, sometimes backed by the Imbonerakure,⁷ against those suspected to be associated with armed groups. Reportedly, the actions by the security forces were often politically or ethnically motivated, which led to extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arrests and arbitrary detentions and torture of members of the opposition, along with members of the former Burundian Armed Forces (ex-Forces armées burundaises). In the same context, there were reports of bodies of individuals stabbed to death, beheaded or killed by persons allegedly belonging to the Imbonerakure or by other unknown persons.

20. Cameroon continued to struggle with three simultaneous crises: armed separatist groups in the North-West and South-West Regions, the Boko Haram attacks in the Far

⁵ See www.afrik.com/le-mouvement-la-revolution-des-casseroles-lance-au-gabon-entache-de-morts.

⁶ See <https://constitutionnet.org/news/revision-gabonese-constitution-between-contestation-modernization-and-inconsistencies>.

⁷ Imbonerakure is cited as one of the main perpetrators of human rights abuses and is often seen as superseding or collaborating with the police to commit such abuses.

North, and the spill over effect from the crisis in the Central African Republic. These situations have heightened human rights violations and abuses, increased vulnerabilities and reduced civic space. They have also caused large-scale displacement in different parts of the country.

21. Since mid-2020, the security situation in the South-West and North-West Regions of the country has been marked by the proliferation of attacks by and clashes between security and defence forces and armed separatist groups. Human rights violations have reportedly been committed by both sides during security and defence forces operations against separatist fighters, which in most cases also caused the death of individuals.

22. Since January 2021, armed separatist groups have increasingly resorted to the use of improvised explosive devices, which appears to be a new dynamic in the crisis. On 6 January 2021, the convoy of the Prefect of the Department of Momo in the North-West Region was attacked by armed separatists using such devices, resulting in the killing of four individuals of the defence and security forces and one civilian.

23. Attacks by armed separatist groups targeting United Nations staff and aid workers have also been on the rise, making it difficult to provide much-needed assistance to the local population. In a press release dated 3 April 2021, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Cameroon condemned the attack on a United Nations convoy perpetrated on 26 March 2021 by separatist fighters in Ikata in the South-West Region. The announcement by the separatists on 22 April 2021 that movements to the roads connecting the North-West and South-West Regions would be restricted from 1 May 2021 sparked concerns, echoing similar announcements in other locations within the regions, which have seriously disrupted the free movement of persons and goods. Moreover, there has also been an increase in attacks on schools⁸ and kidnappings, including of teachers.

24. Human rights violations, such as arbitrary killings and torture continued to be perpetrated with impunity as the Government failed to systematically investigate and hold the perpetrators accountable. OHCHR documented some high profile cases and found substantial grounds to believe that the violations were perpetrated by the Cameroonian security forces. The findings were communicated to the authorities as the basis for initiating further investigations; however, no action was taken. On 10 January 2021, security and defence forces carried out an operation in Mautu village, Muyuka subdivision, South-West Region. They reportedly killed nine people and injured four others, including a woman and a 2-year-old girl. Some witnesses also reported that the security forces had looted and destroyed private property. The authorities denied responsibility and did not initiate investigations into the incident. Moreover, on 7 October 2020, armed separatist groups reportedly killed seven schoolchildren in Kumba, South-West Region. The authorities did not open investigations. With regard to cases investigated and brought to court, delays – the result of several adjournments – cast serious doubt over the willingness of authorities to comply with the obligation to prosecute and hold accountable those responsible. On 14 February 2020, security and defence forces in Ngarbuh, North-West Region, killed 13 civilians, including 10 children and a pregnant woman.⁹ Following a Government-led investigation, three soldiers were arrested and presented at the Yaoundé Military Tribunal. Related proceedings that had been delayed for one year due to several adjournments, began on 17 June 2021.

⁸ A total of 26 attacks on schools in the North West, South West and the Far North Regions by unidentified perpetrators were reported (A/75/873-S/2021/437, para. 225).

⁹ This is an account by the Commission of Inquiry established by the Government, which is inconsistent with the account by independent sources, including the United Nations, pointing to 23 killed, including 15 children and 2 pregnant women.

25. In the Far North Region of Cameroon, Boko Haram carried out attacks, most heavily affecting the Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga departments. The majority of security incidents registered consisted of armed lootings, intimidation, killings of civilians and confrontations with security and defence forces. Between 1 June and 30 September 2020, 130 Boko Haram-related security incidents in Cameroon were reported, resulting in 98 civilian fatalities. On 10 June 2021, intense fighting near a military installation in Darak claimed the lives of more than 15 Cameroonian soldiers. Authorities confirmed that 26 Boko Haram fighters had also been killed. On 13 August 2020, a female suicide bomber killed six civilians and one soldier, in the same region. On 13 September 2020, Boko Haram reportedly attacked a military post in Soueram, near Fotokol in Cameroon, killing six Cameroonian soldiers and wounding nine others. Increasingly, landmines were used in carrying out the attacks.

26. In January 2021, at least three incidents involving improvised explosive devices took place in the Far North. On 8 January, up to 17 civilians, including 5 children, were killed in Mozogo, Mayo-Tsanaga department, after an improvised explosive device was detonated in a crowd that had gathered after an armed incursion into the town.

27. In the Eastern Region of Cameroon, the situation continued to be fragile owing to the incursion into the Cameroonian territory of armed elements from the Central African Republic and the massive influx of refugees fleeing the conflict there. On 28 December 2020, at least 117 soldiers from the Central African Republic found refuge in Cameroon following repeated rebel attacks in the Central African Republic, notably by the Coalition des patriotes pour le changement. According to reliable sources, they crossed the border on 23 December 2020 with their military equipment, before being disarmed at the border town of Garoua Boulai in the East Region and being provided assistance. Besides the soldiers, more than 55,000 people had fled the violence, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat.

III. Main actions taken by Governments in response to human rights challenges

28. The Government of Burundi took several actions to combat impunity. In July and August 2020, the Government arrested and prosecuted members of the Imbonerakure, senior police officers and local administrative officers for extortion and other criminal offences. Other actions taken by the Government included the release in December 2020 of the four *Iwacu* journalists who had been jailed since October 2019 and the call by the President on 28 January 2021 to the National Communication Council to consider engaging in discussions with the suspended media outlets to find a solution for their reinstatement. Since then, three media outlets and a national non-governmental organization have been authorized by the authorities to resume service. On 21 June 2021, the 32-year prison sentence of the human rights defender, Germain Rukuki, rendered in 2018, was reduced to one year by the Ntahangwa Court of Appeal in Bujumbura.

29. In Cameroon, the spokesperson of the Major National Dialogue gave a briefing¹⁰ in October 2019 on actions taken by the authorities to implement the recommendations of the dialogue. The actions included the release of 330 persons who were in custody in connection with the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions and the discontinuance of judicial proceedings against them in military tribunals. On 5 October 2020, a military court ordered the release of Maurice Kamto, along with

¹⁰ See www.crtv.cm/2019/10/point-de-presse-du-porte-parole-gdn-02-octobre-2019.

102 other members of the Mouvement pour la renaissance du Cameroun, at the request of the President. Other actions related to the creation and operationalization of the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee, mandated to deal with Boko Haram ex-combatants in the Far North Region and armed separatist groups in the North-West and South-West Regions and to reintegrate them into civilian life; the creation of the National School of Local Administration; the designation of the Far North, North-West and South-West Regions as economic disaster zones; the special recruitment of 500 translators and interpreters into the civil service; and the recruitment and absorption into the judiciary corps of the first batch of English-speaking judges. On 24 December 2019, the Head of State promulgated a law to promote official languages in Cameroon. He also signed into law the “Bill to institute the general code of regional and local authorities” (Law No. 2019/024 of 24 December 2019), which included granting a special status to the North-West and South-West Regions, and the adoption of the Presidential Plan for the Reconstruction of the North-West and South-West Regions.

30. On 10 June 2021, the President appointed the two first Public Independent Conciliators for the North-West and South-West Regions. According to Law No. 2019/024, Public Independent Conciliators are part of the special status granted to the North-West and South-West Regions. Their functions include: examining and settling disputes amicably between the local population and regional councils; defending and protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens; designing and implementing measures to prevent and combat direct or indirect discrimination that might affect the local population or regional council services; conducting any investigation on the functioning of regional and council public services; and preparing a report on the functioning of regional and council services.

31. On 19 February 2021, the President of the Cameroon issued four decrees appointing 15 Commissioners and the Permanent Secretary of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission. The appointment of the Commission members and their swearing-in before the Supreme Court in Yaoundé on 29 April 2021 constituted a step forward for the operationalization of the Commission established under Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019, by which the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms was replaced. The new Commission was provided with an additional mandate to function as the national mechanism on the prevention against torture.

32. In Gabon, in a positive development, the provision criminalizing homosexuality was removed from the Penal Code in June 2020. Moreover, the Government initiated a reform aimed at providing the National Human Rights Commission a sound legislative basis, a broader mandate to include a national preventive mechanism and enhanced powers to address human rights cases. Gabon was elected to the membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2021.

33. On 4 June 2021, in a plenary session, the Gabonese Senate adopted eight bills modifying certain provisions of Law No. 15/72 of 29 July 1972 on the Civil Code and Law No. 042/2018 of 5 July 2019 on the Criminal Code on the Elimination of Violence against Women. The amendments reinforce gender equality in the household, including setting a definition of adultery, which applies indiscriminately to men and women, as the main ground for divorce. That reform came three months after the President, Ali Bongo Ondimba, had announced, on International Women’s Rights Day, that his gender equality agenda would usher Gabon into a new era. The opposition party, Union nationale, welcomed the reform.

34. In November 2020, the Government of Equatorial Guinea submitted a revised Penal Code to the Parliament for review and approval. The revised Penal Code included a provision on abolishing the death penalty. On 22 February 2021, the Third Deputy Prime Minister in Charge of Human Rights addressed the Human Rights

Council at its 46th session and reported on an ongoing process in Parliament to abolish the death penalty. He called upon the United Nations to support ongoing national efforts to promote human rights. On 28 April 2021, the Senate approved a bill on the prevention of and fight against corruption.

IV. Activities of the Centre from 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2021

35. The Centre implemented activities included in the annual work plans under the 2018–2021 OHCHR Management Plan, with adjustments made as a result of COVID-19 restrictions and United Nations regular budget constraints. The challenges have also enabled the Centre to reflect on opportunities to further the human rights agenda in the subregion, using its comparative advantage and building partnerships.

A. Strengthening the rule of law and accountability

1. Strengthening the capacity of national human rights institutions

36. Support to national human rights institutions within the subregion has been a priority for the Centre as these institutions, when compliant with the international standards, play an important role in ensuring early warning, rule of law and protection.

37. In September and October 2020, the Centre contributed to efforts to ensure accountability for human rights violations in Burundi and provided support to the Independent National Human Rights Commission and the judicial administration of Burundi for the holding of seven mobile courts within the jurisdictions of provinces across the country. In addition to expediting more than 200 case files and processing the trials, the mobile courts resulted in the release of several people arbitrarily detained during the electoral period (May to August 2020).

38. From 11 to 12 May 2021, the Centre organized a workshop for key stakeholders on drafting provisions on the establishment of the national preventive mechanism against torture. Burundi ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture in October 2013 but failed to establish the national preventive mechanism within the one-year required timeline, and only started consultations for its establishment through advocacy efforts and a workshop organized by the Centre in November 2020. The Government opted to revise the mandate of the Independent National Human Rights Commission to host the new mechanism. The Centre continued to follow up on the next steps, including to advocate with the Government for the endorsement of the draft law and its onward transmission to the Parliament for consideration and adoption.

39. In Cameroon, following the Centre's advocacy, the establishment of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission became effective through presidential decrees of 19 February 2021, by which the 15 members and the Permanent Secretary of the Commission were appointed. The appointment, which was followed by the swearing-in before the Supreme Court on 29 April 2021, was questioned by segments of the civil society for lacking the transparency and broad participation called for under the Paris Principles, which cast a shadow of doubt on the credibility of the new institution. As the law endows the Commission to be the national preventive mechanism against torture, it is expected that Cameroon will proceed to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture.

40. In support of the effective operationalization of the Commission, the Centre held an induction training workshop for its members and staff, from 25 to 28 May 2021. The activity was organized in partnership with the International Organization of la Francophonie, the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, and the

Francophone Association of National Human Rights Commissions. The national human rights institutions of Côte d'Ivoire and Morocco, which are in line with the Paris Principles, participated by sharing their experiences, good practices and essential tools to streamline the methods of work and the rules of procedure of the new Cameroon Human Rights Commission.

41. In Gabon, the Centre hosted an online training workshop from 10 to 13 November 2020 for the members of the National Human Rights Commission to reinforce their technical and operational capacity to discharge their human rights mandate. The workshop provided an opportunity to empower the Commission to gather verified information and produce quality reports as advocacy tools with the authorities.

42. On 23 and 26 November 2020, the Centre held a high-level consultation with the Parliament of Gabon, which includes the Senate and the National Assembly, on the international standards regarding the independent and effective functioning of national human rights institutions. Since previous efforts over the past decade to engage the Gabonese authorities in bringing about genuine reform towards a full-fledged National Human Rights Commission had failed, the unprecedented activity proved instrumental in creating momentum for strengthening the Commission. The 50 participating Senators and the plenary of the National Assembly indicated their commitment to engaging in a process that would be in line with the Paris Principles in the consideration and adoption of the draft law and urged the Government to facilitate and expedite the reform process.

43. From 22 to 23 July 2020, the secretariat of the International Conference of the Great Lakes, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes, the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions and the Centre organized a virtual workshop for national human rights institutions and other stakeholders of the Great Lake Region to discuss and define strategies to support the strengthening of national human rights institutions. A total of 43 participants from countries of the subregion whose national human rights institutions fell short of meeting international standards (Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon) attended the workshop. National institutions having "A status," from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, participated and shared their best practices and experiences. The workshop resulted in: (a) creating a platform for sharing best practices and experiences for national human rights institutions in the subregion; and (b) discussing the institutional and operational capacity strengthening of such institutions. The workshop participants also adopted road maps for each country on strengthening their respective national human rights institutions.

2. Strengthening the capacity of other human rights and democracy institutions

44. In Burundi, the Centre organized a workshop in Gitega from 24 to 26 May 2021, for 47 members of military courts, including 10 women, on the administration of justice and respect for the rights of detainees. The workshop focused on empowering the military magistrates and other judicial practitioners on the use of the international human rights norms in the proceedings and decisions of the military courts, thus contributing to strengthening guarantees for fair trials. Commitments were made to use the skills and techniques acquired in judicial processes. The workshop followed five other capacity-building sessions carried out in October 2020 for judges and lawyers in Gitega, Karuzi, Muramvya, Ngozi and Rutana.

45. In Burundi, in November 2019, a group of 60 Burundian lawyers, including 20 women, were selected to be trained on the protection of witnesses, victims and other persons at risk in judicial and non-judicial proceedings. The training was aimed at preventing acts of reprisal, retaliation and repression prevalent in Burundi in the context of a weak judicial system. The lawyers committed to using the law of 27 June

2016 on the protection of witnesses, victims and other persons at risk, which had not been widely known up to that point, to claim the rights of their clients to protection, when needed.

46. In Burundi, the Centre conducted a training workshop in November and December 2019 for penitentiary personnel of the Bujumbura and Ngozi prisons, respectively, on respect for the rights of detainees. The training helped to promote an awareness of the applicability of human rights in the administration of justice concerning the rights of detainees. The training led to the expansion of similar activities in July and November 2020, with seven awareness-raising sessions in different prisons on the protection of the rights of the detainees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

47. In Cameroon, in its efforts to support the expansion of the civic space, the Centre organized activities to strengthen the collaboration between the media and the security and defence forces. In September 2020, the Centre organized a workshop for 34 professionals in the area of human rights in conflict situations, including 28 representatives of law enforcement bodies and 6 representatives of the media. The workshop adopted a code of conduct applicable to both groups in crisis contexts. Guidelines were established during the workshop to enable journalists to have easier access to security and defence information sources in order to ensure quality reporting.

48. In Cameroon, the Centre continued its advocacy for the integration of human rights education in the training centres for rule-of-law institutions. Consultations were held with the Director of the National School of Penitentiary Administration in Buea in August 2020, the Director of the National School of Administration and Magistracy and the Director of the International School for Security Forces in Yaoundé in September 2020. The Centre obtained their agreement to collaborate in the integration of human rights in their curriculum and in other activities.

49. In July 2020, the Centre engaged with the Minister of Justice of Cameroon to discuss the amendment of the 2014 anti-terrorist law (Law No. 2014/028 of 23 December 2014), which falls short of international standards. The Centre shared its observations with other United Nations mechanisms, including the special procedures mandate holders, and encouraged the Government to reform the law in line with international standards.

B. Protecting civic space and people's participation

1. Participation of groups facing discrimination in political life

50. In Cameroon, in order to support and encourage the participation of all groups in political affairs, the Centre carried out high-level advocacy with the Cameroonian elections management body to promote the participation of women, youth, indigenous persons and persons living with disabilities in the electoral process, ahead of the regional elections in December 2020. As a result, the elections management body set quotas of representation for those groups to be taken into consideration on the candidates' lists while ensuring that the infrastructure and voting materials were accessible for persons living with disabilities, including the unprecedented use of braille.

51. In its support for marginalized groups, in December 2020, the Centre organized an awareness and education activity in Cameroon, in collaboration with civil society organizations, for 130 widows on the legal provisions protecting their rights. Various social actors, in particular traditional rulers, were urged to respect the rights of widows, encourage their effective participation in community activities and contribute to the elimination of stereotypes related to cultures that undermine the enjoyment of their rights.

52. The Centre continued to support civil society organizations through various activities and help them to implement their mandates. In that regard, in August 2020 and April 2021, the Centre organized two workshops in Buea for civil society organizations on monitoring, reporting and integrating human rights in humanitarian action and response in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon. The participating organizations agreed to establish an information-sharing platform and to support one another in advancing the protection and promotion of human rights in those regions.

53. In March 2020, ahead of the electoral period from May to August 2020, the Centre organized a workshop in Bujumbura on the participation of young girls and women in the political life in Burundi. A total of 40 young girls and women from all provinces across the country, and representing political parties and civil society organizations in charge of gender equality and women's political participation, attended the workshop. The discussions helped to raise the awareness of the attendees of their right to participation in political processes.

54. In Burundi, in the framework of the campaign 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, the Centre facilitated a discussion in November 2019 on challenges hindering the implementation of the law adopted on 22 September 2016 on the fight against gender-based violence. The participants, including representatives of women's rights organizations, agreed on their respective roles in promoting peace and development through the fight against gender-based violence and on strategies concerning how to advocate with the authorities against gender-based violence. In line with the campaign, authorities were called upon to ensure wide dissemination of the law, combat impunity, facilitate recourse for and reintegration of victims facing intimidation and threats for engaging in judicial procedures, and assess the impact of the law.

2. Respect for freedom of opinion and expression

55. On 10 December 2020, in its efforts to contribute to the expansion of democratic space, the Centre organized a virtual workshop for 30 officials from countries of the subregion on the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and the effectiveness of the exercise of public liberties. The activity resulted in identifying priority actions to strengthen civic space in the subregion, pursuant to the relevant commitments made in the Nairobi Declaration on Justice and Good Governance in May 2019. It concluded with a road map and recommendations that will contribute to create and sustain an enabling environment for civil society organisations, human rights defenders and security forces to contribute more effectively to peace and security in the subregion.

56. In October 2020, the Centre organized two capacity-building workshops for journalists in Burundi (Gitega and Bujumbura) on the protection of human rights. The focus of the workshop was to provide the journalists with a space in which to discuss the right to freedom of expression curtailed in the context of the electoral and political crisis. Participants discussed ways to ensure the protection of journalists and reinstate the democratic space while ensuring compliance with the obligations and duties of the media. Participants represented a wide spectrum of the media in Burundi.

57. In June, July and December 2020, the Centre organized a series of activities in Cameroon (Buea and Yaoundé) for 135 journalists on rights-based reporting in the context of the impact of the pandemic on economic, social and cultural rights. In the current era of disinformation, journalists were encouraged to communicate only verified information on the COVID-19 pandemic and to establish mechanisms for rapid verification of COVID-related human rights concerns.

58. On 10 December 2020, the Centre inaugurated the opening of a Regional Human Rights Resource Centre in the South-West Region of Cameroon, through joint efforts with the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, a local human rights

organization. Government authorities, national institutions, civil society, researchers, the public, the media and other stakeholders will benefit from the Resource Centre, which will provide an opportunity to receive information and guidance on research related to human rights and will provide local human rights activists with the knowledge and capacity to strengthen the protection and promotion of human rights.

59. On 24 July 2020, the Centre developed and edited an information booklet on elections and the protection of human rights. The booklet serves as an awareness-raising tool for security forces in the subregion, alerting them about the importance of the participation of internal security forces in the protection of the rights of voters and candidates during elections.

C. Integrating human rights into sustainable development

60. On 4 February 2021, ahead of the implementation of the Presidential Plan for Reconstruction and Development in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon, the Centre provided a training workshop, with United Nations support, for 15 staff members of United Nations entities in Cameroon. At the workshop participants discussed the application of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy. The training objective was to ensure that United Nations support to the Presidential Plan for Reconstruction and Development, which is aimed at reducing the effects of the crisis on populations of the North-West and South-West Regions and to address the immediate needs of the affected populations of those regions, was carried out in compliance with due diligence principles.

61. On 25 and 26 September 2019, in collaboration with the Burundian Ministry of National Solidarity, Social Affairs, Human Rights and Gender and development partners, the Centre facilitated the adoption of a road map on follow-up to the recommendations of the 2018 universal periodic review on Burundi. The road map provides details on concrete steps to be taking, including timelines and the distribution of tasks to monitor the implementation of the recommendations by the respective stakeholders. The road map takes into account the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

D. Early warning, prevention of violations and protection of human rights in situations of conflict and insecurity

62. Owing to the prevailing security and COVID-19 pandemic contexts, the Centre could only undertake a few field missions to Cameroon. The Centre supplemented the missions with remote monitoring in the subregion to gather information, verify and follow up on allegations of human rights violations and abuses.

63. In September 2019, the Government of Cameroon facilitated the deployment of an OHCHR assessment mission to the North-West and South-West Regions, following the visit of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in May 2019. The mission had two objectives: to assess the human rights situation in those regions and to recommend corrective actions and options for further cooperation with the Government. Following extensive consultations with the Government and United Nations partners, a summary of the mission report, its recommendations, as well as the information provided by the Government on actions taken, will be made public.

64. The Centre also improved cooperation with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Africa through exchanges of information and discussions on the human rights situation in the subregion and other related issues. The activity enabled the Centre to respond to situations of human rights

violations and abuses through advocacy and to propose recommendations for appropriate action by the concerned authorities.

65. On 1 June 2021, an emergency response team was established at the Centre in response to the need to strengthen its prevention capacity, enhance the predictable production of early warning and human rights analysis, establish the basis for targeted preventive action and offer a swift response in relation to potential, emerging or actual crises.

E. Increasing the implementation of the recommendations of international human rights mechanisms

66. During the reporting period, the Centre remained committed to assisting countries of the subregion in meeting their international human rights obligations and to engaging with international human rights mechanisms. The consistent cooperation of the countries of the subregion with the universal periodic review was commendable. The countries reviewed during the reporting period were Rwanda on 25 January 2021, and Sao Tome and Principe on 27 January 2021. The practice of submitting voluntary midterm reports under the universal periodic review mechanism was further encouraged.

67. Engagement with human rights treaty bodies by countries of the subregion was inconsistent and required significant strengthening, as did the more comprehensive implementation of recommendations of all United Nations human rights mechanisms. It should be noted that Burundi submitted its third periodic report to the Committee against Torture and its periodic report to the Human Rights Committee in 2020. Chad submitted its first periodic report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on 21 August 2020 and Rwanda submitted its tenth periodic report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2021.

68. About half of the countries of the subregion have extended a standing invitation to United Nations special procedures mandate holders. Requests for country visits were pending with Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon and Rwanda during the period under review. The restrictions related to the pandemic exacerbated the situation; nevertheless, engagement with special procedures mandate holders on visits and in responding to communications needs to be stepped up. The Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in the Central African Republic visited the country in February 2020, while the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples visited the Congo in October 2019.

69. The Centre continued to assist countries of the subregion in meeting their responsibilities and in ensuring cooperation with the international human rights mechanisms. From 9 to 11 March 2021, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice of Cameroon, the Centre organized a workshop to raise awareness on the recommendations made by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, validate the follow-up report on concluding observations and adopt an road map on implementation.

V. Human rights situation in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic

70. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a global health crisis with major socioeconomic impacts, including in the subregion. At the beginning of the pandemic, Governments of the subregion adopted a series of measures to curb the spread of the virus. Some of the measures included the declaration of a state of health emergency in the Congo

and Sao Tome and Principe; strict confinement in the Congo and Rwanda; confinement in Gabon; movement restrictions in Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon; and the mandate to wear protective facemasks in all countries of the subregion. Schools were closed throughout the subregion and businesses were required to be locked down from dusk until dawn. Gatherings were restricted to no more than 50 people in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, and in some cases were suspended altogether (Chad, Congo, Rwanda, Sao Tome). All the countries closed their borders to international air and sea travel, with only a few allowing essential cargo flights. The imposition of the measures was at times enforced with negative impact on the enjoyment of human rights, for example through the reported excessive use of force in some countries.¹¹

71. The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and the accompanying restrictions affect some segments of the population disproportionately, including those living in poverty and in informal settlements, people facing multiple forms of discrimination, as well as those who are increasingly at risk of being left behind such as persons with disabilities; indigenous peoples; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people; older persons; internally displaced persons; refugees; migrants; and women victims of violence. The effects of economic austerity and poor access to social services, clean water, health care and shelter, and the absence of social protection floors, are magnified in the context of the pandemic.

72. The rapidly devastating effects of COVID-19 pandemic underlined the fragility of the human rights infrastructures and the governance systems across the subregion. Responding to this multifaceted crisis from a human rights perspective requires heightened engagement from the Centre for the protection and the promotion of human rights as well as early warning and rapid responses. The Centre is working to achieve greater impact through the implementation of its project on integrating human rights into the COVID-19 response and recovery and addressing the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic in Central Africa, with the support of Belgium. The Centre could achieve greater results if the necessary support were provided for increased resources.

VI. Conclusion and recommendations

73. **The reporting period was characterized by the persistence of underlying challenges on the political, security and human rights fronts, which were further aggravated by the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in the subregion. The cumulative effects of the situation have compromised efforts by States in respect of their obligations and commitments for good governance, accountability and the rule of law. Grievances over human rights violations and abuses are mounting, as the authorities have struggled to meet basic socioeconomic needs for the people in their countries, further delaying the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals.**

74. **The reporting period was also characterized by the limited capacity of the Centre to carry out its mandate owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and to financial constraints, despite the ever-increasing requests by Member States, civil society organizations, national human rights institutions and other stakeholders for support from the Centre. Nevertheless, the Centre continued to champion the**

¹¹ In Gabon, excessive use of force by security forces in the implementation of these measures allegedly led to the deaths of two individuals and to several being wounded: see www.afrik.com/le-mouvement-la-revolution-des-casseroles-lance-au-gabon-entache-de-morts. In the Congo, excessive use of force led to a crackdown on demonstrators and the death of one individual on 18 April 2020: see www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2021/04/republic-of-congo-crackdown-on-dissent-as-economic-crisis/.

human rights agenda in the subregion through productive cooperation with both the States and other partners. The broad base of its collaboration has been instrumental in the implementation of the mandate of the Centre and has included the following partners: the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lake Region, the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, the International Organization of la Francophonie, the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, the offices of the United Nations resident coordinators and United Nations sister agencies, and national stakeholders in Burundi, Cameroon, the Congo and Gabon.

75. I encourage all Governments of the subregion to engage meaningfully with the Centre and create enabling conditions for its effective work. They should also intensify their engagement and comprehensive implementation of the recommendations of all United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the treaty bodies and the universal periodic review, and extend standing invitations to the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, support their country visits and regularly engage in communications on individual cases.

76. While acknowledging the concrete steps taken by the authorities in Cameroon to address the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions, I further encourage the Government to implement the set of recommendations made by the OHCHR assessment mission in September 2019.

77. While I take note of some steps taken by the Government of Burundi to improve the human rights situation, I call upon the authorities to increase their efforts to advance human rights in the country, including by guaranteeing freedom and security for journalists, human rights defenders and members of political opposition groups, and by reinstating a wider democratic space.

78. I welcome the forthcoming deployment of Human Rights Advisers in Burundi and Equatorial Guinea. I encourage other countries, including the Congo and Gabon, to cooperate closely with OHCHR in strengthening national human rights protection systems in line with their international human rights commitments.

79. In view of the many significant human rights challenges in the subregion and the growing requests made by Governments and other partners for the Centre's support, I reiterate my previous appeal to Member States to consider increasing the regular budget allocations to the Centre, in particular in terms of human resources and funding for technical cooperation activities. This would help the Centre to achieve greater results in terms of strengthening national human rights protection systems and moving more rapidly towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Central Africa.
