

BAMENDA PROVINCIAL EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

[BAPEC]

THE SECRETARIAT

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE

P.O. BOX 82, BAMENDA

NORTH WEST REGION

C A M E R O O N

BAPEC/PRES/2017/28

4th October 2017

DECLARATION OF THE BISHOPS OF THE BAMENDA PROVINCIAL EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE (BAPEC)
FOLLOWING THE MASSIVE DEMONSTRATIONS AND THE CURFEW IMPOSED ON THE NORTH WEST
AND SOUTH WEST REGIONS FROM FRIDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER TO MONDAY, 2ND OCTOBER 2017

“If you in your turn had only understood on this day the message of peace!” (Lk. 19:42)

Since Friday, 22nd September 2017, and particularly from midnight on Friday, 29th September to midnight on Monday, 2nd October 2017, the people of the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon, which regions are coterminous with the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda, have gone through a very challenging and crucial period. Although the danger is not yet over, we, the Bishops of the Bamenda Provincial Episcopal Conference (BAPEC), consider it our bounded and God-given duty to make this declaration at this point in time to share with our brothers and sisters and people of good will what we have gone through up till now and possibly to contribute to the prevention of the worse that may still come if our voice, which is that of the voiceless, and similar other well-intentioned voices are not heeded by the competent authorities.

“A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loudly lamenting: it was Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they were no more.” (Mt. 2:18; cf. Jer. 31:15). This lamentation of the Prophet Jeremiah is once more a reality as it was with the brutal murder of the Holy Innocents in the place of the Infant Jesus. From Bota in Fako to Ako in Donga Mantung, from Bakassi in Ndian to Menji in Lebialem, families are weeping for their children, for they are no more. Since Friday, 29th

September 2017, there have been various forms of violence and atrocities that have bedevilled most towns and villages of the North West and South West Regions, which coincide with the territory of the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province, resulting to even the supreme loss of human lives. The groans from the dying and shrieks of the wounded make our hearts bleed from pain. The sighs of those who have lost property through looting or arson, the pain of anxiety inflicted on families and friends of those abducted or missing, the trauma caused on the young and the old by the fright from the warlike atmosphere of last weekend in particular have left another heap of painful memories in our minds and hearts. We want, in the first place, to express our profound grief and sympathies to those families who in the recent crisis have lost their dear ones. We pray for the repose of the souls of those who have died. May the Risen Lord welcome them into his Kingdom. We express our solidarity with those who have sustained injuries and those suffering in any way, those arrested and incarcerated, and the families that have been separated from their loved ones or displaced. May the Crucified Lord, with whom they are now hanging on the Cross, be their consolation.

In the Gospel of Luke (19:41-42) we are told that when Jesus drew near to the city of Jerusalem he shed tears over it and said: "If you in your turn had only understood on this day the message of peace!" Following the initial peaceful demonstration of Lawyers of the Common Law, the sit-down strike of the Teachers' Trade Unions in November 2016, on 6th December 2016, we, the Bishops of the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province, in an Appeal concerning the Sit-down Strike Action Called by the Teachers' Trade Unions of the English-Speaking Subsystem of Education, pointed out that it is important to respect the conventions that bind us together as a people and that the bicultural nature of Cameroon, which enriches our diversity, should be a treasured commodity that guides our interaction with each other as children of the same fatherland. We also condemned in very unequivocal terms the violence perpetuated by some groups of young people on the one hand and the acts of brutality, torture, inhuman and unjustified treatment meted out to some of our youths by the Forces of Law and Order on the other hand. We called on the Government to restrain such barbaric action of the Forces of Law and Order and to bring to justice those of them who had been irresponsible, so that peace may reign.

Unfortunately, the Government did not heed our appeal, but the CPDM Ruling Party went on to organise a so-called 'Peace March', which provoked the resistance of most of the people and the subsequent reaction of the Forces of Law and Order that led to further violence on 8th December 2016. Violence begets violence! The consequent result of the violence on that day was the shooting of unarmed youths by the Forces of Law and Order, a black Thursday indeed in Bamenda! Despite the call of the Archbishop of Bamenda for the demilitarisation of Bamenda Town and the rest of the towns of the English-speaking regions of Cameroon, the military presence in the area was rather increased and many more persons were arrested and ferried to Yaoundé.

In the meantime, we asked in writing to meet with the Head of State to explain to him the situation on the ground in the two regions as we saw and lived it and to present to him a Memorandum, which we had written on 22nd December 2016 about the Anglophone Problem. In the Memorandum, we

gave the historical background of the Anglophone Problem, articulated the Problem in five points, gave various instances in which the Problem is manifested and proposed a way forward to solve the socio-political impasse in the North West and South West Regions. The requested audience was never granted. Till today, there has been no official response to the Memorandum. Rather, we have been erroneously accused of being the invisible hand supporting the activists and of keeping the schools closed as it is evidenced by the fact that we were dragged to court for treason, because we did not tell the parents to bring their children back to school and for other related accusations.

Friday, 22nd September 2017, was a very significant turning point. Following weeks of propaganda and a call by different groups and persons, most of whom have taken refuge outside the country and who are advocating for the restoration of the independence of West Cameroon, a huge population of men, women, youths, old and young, and even children turned out on the streets of many towns and villages of the North West and South West Regions to demonstrate peacefully and express their right to self-determination. This peaceful march of mostly innocent citizens, carrying peace plants and shouting "No violence! No violence!" and defying the Forces of Law and Order, should have sent home to the authorities a message of the fact that it was not just a handful of people outside the country calling for this restoration. While some of the Forces of Law and Order, reading the signs of the times, did not react violently, others instead of using their guns to protect citizens, shot live bullets at unarmed civilians, killing some and maiming others. Within the same period, there has been a harassing chase of Anglophones by the Forces of Law and Order even outside the territory under consideration, so much so that many of them do not feel free anymore throughout the national territory of Cameroon.

The climax came when, in an attempt to prevent the programme of the restoration of independence on 1st October 2017 by the leaders of these groups, the Government declared a curfew in the North West and South West Regions from midnight on Friday, 29th September to midnight on Monday, 2nd October 2017. This was in fact authorized by the Senate and Parliament in their Joint Communiqué of 26th September 2017. The communiqués of the Governors of the North West and South West Regions forbade movement from one division to another, public gatherings and assemblies of more than four (04) persons in their respective territories from 29th September to 2nd October. In some places, like Buea and Mamfe, Sunday Mass was anticipated on Saturday in the evening. However, the Archbishop of Bamenda, in consultation with the Governor of the North West Region, wrote to inform the Archdiocesan Community that the Governor's prohibition on public gatherings and assemblies of more than four persons did not include religious services. The letter of the Archbishop, which was endorsed by the Secretary General in the Governor's Office on the 30th of September 2017, repeated the call he and the other Bishops have made several times, and asked the faithful to pray for peace and tranquillity especially in the Church Province of Bamenda.

On Sunday, 1st October 2017, some Priests and some members of Christ's Lay Faithful were prevented by the heavy military presence on their streets from going to church and so they failed to exercise their constitutional right of freedom of worship. In some areas, we noted with disgust that

some Christians were teargassed as they came out of Mass! This move, by whosoever instructed, created a lot of confusion and chaos, especially as the faithful believed that the Archbishop's letter, calling for prayers for peace and tranquillity and which had been endorsed by the Governor of the North West Region, was sufficient authorization for Sunday worship to go on as normal, despite the political tension. We, the Bishops of the Bamenda Provincial Episcopal Conference, are sad and disturbed, having learned that some of our Christians were pursued into their houses – some arrested, some maimed and some (including defenceless teenagers and elderly persons) were simply shot to death, some from helicopters. Elsewhere in the world, the Forces of Law and Order protect demonstrating citizens. In our country, peaceful demonstrations, except perhaps those organized by the ruling party, seem to be an opportune moment for our Armed Forces to demonstrate their shooting prowess both from the ground and from the air on unarmed and helpless civilians.

We also note, with embarrassment and shame, that the Minister of Communication has praised the professionalism of the Armed Forces, in total disregard of the fact that some of the heinous acts of brutality and barbarism meted out to the populations were by some members of the same Armed Forces. Either the Minister of Communication was not adequately informed or he was misleading the national and international communities. The enthronement of lies, no matter from which side in our country, does not help in nation building. It rather destroys the efforts of honest and God-fearing Cameroonians who truly seek to be free and responsible, not only for themselves but also for others and for their environment. Today, at least in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon, there is a huge gap of credibility between the population, those calling for restoration and the administration.

We condemn in the strongest terms possible the barbarism and the irresponsible use of firearms against unarmed civilians by the Forces of Law and Order, even if they are provoked. The divine injunction: “Thou shalt not kill!” remains valid even in such circumstances. We call on the Head of State of the Republic of Cameroon, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, to stop the bloodbath and genocide that has skilfully been initiated in the North West and South West Regions. Mr. Kofi Annan, Former Secretary General of the United Nations Organisation, said that “a genocide begins with the killing of one man – not for what he had done – but for who he is”. The statement by the Minister of Communications, the Spokesperson for the Government, that some Anglophone Cameroonians are “terrorists” is a subtle call for what can be described as “ethnic cleansing” or a genocide as all Anglophone Cameroonians are now considered as ‘terrorists’ and as such they qualify for elimination, just because they are Anglophones! We need to stop the imminent genocide! We, as a nation, need a change of orientation to forestall any further deterioration of the situation in the North West and South West Regions. We call on all stakeholders to exercise restraint, develop a sense of respect for the truth and for human dignity and return to an inclusive and facilitated dialogue that will begin a process of national healing and reconciliation.

The massive turnout of people for the demonstrations on Friday, 22nd September 2017, and on Sunday, 1st October 2017, has, among other things, the following implications:

The Anglophone Problem is now truly one that touches the hearts of very many people in all villages, towns and cities of the North West and South West Regions.

It is no longer just a problem of “a few disgruntled Anglophones at home and in the diaspora”, as some people have tried to play it down.

It is no longer just a problem of lawyers and teachers, as it seemed to be from the outset last year.

At the moment, the Anglophone Problem can no longer be taken lightly or ignored. It needs urgent attention, to avoid the growing genocide. People have lost loved ones to brutal killings and do not even know where some of their corpses are now. Every individual who is killed increases the number of aggrieved persons and families, resentment and anger, which are very difficult to address.

The heart of the matter is the ongoing Anglophone Problem which the Government has persistently failed to address adequately, resulting in deep and mounting resentment and bitterness among the population. Cosmetic changes which benefit only a few are not enough. The delay in addressing the problem has distanced many citizens of these two Regions from the rest of the country. The demonstrations of Friday, 22nd September 2017, across the two Regions should have opened the eyes of many, including the Government, to the scale of the problem. While the demonstrations were largely peaceful, there were a few incidents, provoked by either side that led to some deaths. We condemn all acts of violence by any one.

We vehemently condemn the intoxication and exploitation of the masses by some of the members of the restoration group. Some of them had told the populations to march into government offices and take back their country. They were to arrest any civil administrators, who had not abdicated, and take them to the palaces of Fons and Chiefs. This was irrational and not feasible. Sadly, the result of such an action has been the torture, arrest and killing of so many people. No matter what diplomatic gains have been made at the international level, right reason and international law informs us that this is not his nations gain independence.

We equally denounce the deception and lies by the official and some private media. The lack of adequate reporting of the reality on the ground only shows that the Government is not prepared to address the problem. It is a fact that there was heavy militarization of the same regions leading up to 1st October 2017. This was followed by threats on the official media from some government officials that anyone who came out to demonstrate on 1st October 2017, would face the law in its full force. Military men and women and machinery were positioned in the towns, cities and even villages of the Regions. This was simply intimidation. Military helicopters were also seen flying over the territory. Although the curfew did not include religious worship, many clergy and Christians were prevented from going to church. In some cases, Christians were caught and beaten up. In Mbve in the Diocese of Kumbo, tear gas was thrown at Christians as soon as they left the church. In Momo Division in the

Archdiocese of Bamenda, the Senior Divisional Officer sent out a communiqué, forbidding religious worship, and, by so doing, contradicting the order of the Governor.

Government gave firm instructions through the Communiqués of the Governors and Senior Divisional Officers asking people to stay at home from 29th September to 2nd October. The majority of the people, who stayed at home, were quickly visited by the Forces of Law and Order, who intimidated them, arrested some, tortured some, and took some away to where we do not know. In Buea, Kumba, Mamfe, Kumbo and Bamenda, this trend of activity was rampant. In Bamesing, in the Archdiocese of Bamenda, some young men were caught and shot on the legs. There are gruesome pictures of the acts of violence committed against unarmed and innocent civilians during the period. Some people who were killed were carried away and it is not known where their bodies were taken to. The bodies of the prisoners who were shot dead as they tried to escape from Kumbo Prison, after having been taken to Shisong Hospital, were hurriedly retrieved by the soldiers. No one knows where their mortal remains are now.

It is reported that truckloads of people arrested have been driven down to Yaoundé. This adds to those arrested earlier during the year whose release the populations have been requesting from the Government. This only makes a bad situation worse. Citizens of these two Regions have been branded as terrorists and are being treated as such. It is hard to believe that the hundreds of thousands of children, men and women, who came out to demonstrate peacefully on 22nd September and on 1st October 2017 are all terrorists. We shall soon all be considered terrorists! Anglophones living in Francophone Cameroon are now targets. The military have broken into some of their homes, looted and arrested people. The mere fact of being an Anglophone now looks like a crime in itself!

The very fact that the Presidents of the Senate and of the National Assembly organized a rally at the Reunification Monument in Yaoundé on the same 1st October 2017 under the pretext of celebrating National Unity, when the military was intimidating, torturing, arresting and killing people in the North West and South West Regions, can be considered a mockery of the people of the North West and South West Regions, who were literally under siege and brutality for daring to air the same concerns. This is an indication that the Government is insensitive to their problems and welfare and that they do not belong. Schools are not functioning as they should and businesses have been grounded in these Regions. The economy is badly hit by this crisis and things are likely to get worse.

Almost exactly 25 years ago, on 29th November 1992, the late Archbishop of Bamenda, Most Rev. Paul Verdzev, wrote a message to the Christians condemning torture, which had been rampant during the State of Emergency imposed on the North West Province. We would like to paraphrase and make our own what he said at that time because it is very relevant to us today in a similar context of socio-political crisis and curfew, imposed this time in both the North West and South West Regions. We congratulate publicly those police officers, gendarmes and soldiers, who have

acknowledged the fact that harassment, wanton arrests, destruction of houses and property (cars, motorbikes, farms, estates, etc.), ransacking of others as well as looting, arson, torture, brutalizing, and killing are abominable crimes and have consequently refused to participate in or carry out such acts. Torture, cruel and inhuman treatment, was totally unheard of in the Cameroons under the United Kingdom Trusteeship. It was inconceivable in the British Cameroons for a police officer to slap anyone, let alone torture or harass people. We pray and hope that the priceless heritage of respect for the human person, which prevailed in the British Cameroons before 1961, may soon be recovered and shared among the people of this nation. Even though few, such uniformed men and women are the honour of the Forces of Law and Order and they bear witness to the fact that "one must never confuse error with the one who errs ... The person who errs is always and above all a human being, and he must always be regarded and treated in accordance with that lofty dignity" (Pacem in Terris, no. 54).

To those administrative authorities, gendarmes, police officers and soldiers who, unfortunately, accept to inflict torture and other forms of cruel, sadistic and degrading treatment on human beings, we respectfully and fraternally propose the following points for deep reflection. First, if you are a believer in God, remember that "whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on the body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity ... all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They do not only poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer the injuries. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator" (Gaudium et Spes, no. 27). The practice of these ills makes you more of a brute beast than a human person. Second, these practices which you indulge in make you one of the worst subversive and destabilizing elements working against the State and the Nation. The State of Cameroon desires to be recognized by national and international public opinion as one which exists and operates under the Rule of Law. When you practice these ills, you subvert and undermine the moral authority of the State, you erode and you destroy the credibility of its claim to be recognized, respected, and held in high esteem as a State which operates under the Rule of Law. Every time you force people to roll and to wallow in mud for your 'amusement', you drag the name of the country and its Government into mud and make the country a pariah among the nations. Third, remember that when you accept to inflict such pain upon others, merely because you have been ordered to do so by your superior officer, you make yourself a mere robot and not a responsible person. Remember that you have a personal conscience which tells you that these practices are abominable evils and should be avoided. You know it and that is why you carry out most of these practices in a secret torture chamber, away from the public eye. Remember, too, that even if the State does not punish you for these crimes, the lame excuse that you were only carrying out orders will not help you before God. As a human being endowed with reason and personal freedom, God holds you responsible and accountable for all your actions, including these crimes.

Finally, let every member of the Administration, the Forces of Law and Order remember that this nation has freely committed itself to adhere to the International Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Convention stipulates, among

other things, that “exceptional circumstances such as a state of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency may not be invoked as a justification of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.” The Convention says furthermore, “that an order given by a Superior Officer or some other public Authority cannot be invoked as a justification of torture.” Consequently, those Administrative Authorities and the Forces of Law and Order who took advantage of recent happenings in the North West and South West Regions to commit these and similar crimes are making a mockery of this Convention and thereby bringing shame and contempt on the name of the country. “So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets” (Mt. 7:12).

Mindful of the mandate of the Church from her Divine Founder to go out and teach all nations (cf. Mt. 28:19), we have insisted on the fact that since “all men of whatever race, condition or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education” (Gravissimum Educationis, n. 1), all children of the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon should be given the opportunity to continue formal education. The Church believes that the school as a place of learning should always remain open, no matter what problems the people are undergoing. The reason is that learning is absolutely essential for the better mastery and resolution of the same problems. It is precisely because such problems can take years to resolve, the best way for children to be involved in the struggle is by being in school, by studying. Many are aware of this, and have sent their children to other regions of the country and even abroad, so that they may continue their education. However, the vast majority of people are unable to send their children elsewhere, which is why we, the Bishops of BAPEC, urge and encourage everyone to stand by all the schools in our two Regions so that our children may not be left behind through our own fault.

We once more call on the Government to release all those arrested in connection with this crisis. No meaningful dialogue can take place while those people remain in prison. All those killed during this curfew and the whole crisis, whose bodies have not been presented to their families, should be accounted for and their bodies returned to their families. The two Regions should be demilitarized as soon as possible and all forms of threats and intimidation on individuals and groups living in any part of the country should cease. All forms of manipulation and false propaganda especially through the media should stop. The Church advocates responsible journalism and the right use of the media. Irresponsible and misleading propaganda by individuals, groups or the State is unacceptable. We condemn all forms of threats, intimidation, wanton arrests, torture, and killings in the strongest terms.

We call for honest and meaningful dialogue with the right people to determine the nature and form of the state to be undertaken as soon as possible. We must refrain from divisive and poisonous behaviour and language. Utterances that are demeaning, insulting, or derogatory should be discouraged. As St. James says, the tongue must not set fire to the forest (cf. James 3:5). We call on all Christians to intensify their prayers for meaningful dialogue and for peace.

We call on all our families, Small Christian Communities and parish communities to organise the praying of the Rosary this month of October for peace in Cameroon. We pray that Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, Principal Patroness of Cameroon, may intercede for us and for the departed martyrs of the Anglophone Struggle. Let us pray for a true change of heart, so that as a reconciled people we may build a country wherein truth, justice, reconciliation and peace reign.

We declare Saturday, 14th October 2017, a Day of Mourning in our Ecclesiastical Province, to be marked by the celebration of Requiem Masses in all our parishes for the repose of the souls of all those who have died because of the present socio-political crisis. We call on everybody to say the following Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi, following the Prayer after Communion at every Mass until we get a solution to the problem.

PRAYER OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI FOR PEACE

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Given in Bamenda,

This Wednesday, 4th October 2017,

Memorial of Saint Francis of Assisi.

+ George Nkuo

Bishop of Kumbo

President of BAPEC

+ Andrew Nkea

Bishop of Mamfe

Vice-President of BAPEC

+ Cornelius Esua

Archbishop of Bamenda

+ Immanuel Bushu

Bishop of Buea

+ Agapitus Nfon

Bishop of Kumba

+ Michael Bibi

Auxiliary Bishop of Bamenda