



**DEFENDDEFENDERS**

East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

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H.E. Ms. Nazhat Shameem Khan  
President of the United Nations Human Rights Council  
Palais des Nations  
1202 Geneva  
Switzerland

Kampala and Geneva, 17 March 2021

*Re: Act of intimidation and reprisal committed by the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Cameroon during the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council*

Madam President,

**I am writing to bring an act of intimidation and reprisal for cooperation with the United Nations in the field of human rights to your attention.**

I respectfully ask you to raise the incident with the Permanent Representative of the State concerned – namely, Cameroon – as well as publicly during the Council’s proceedings; to condemn the State representative’s behaviour; to remind the Cameroonian Government of its international legal obligations, including its obligations as a Member of the Council; and to reiterate the right of duly-accredited representatives of civil society to participate in the work of the Council free from intimidation and reprisals, as well as the unacceptable character of reprisals.

The facts are the following. They are verifiable, including on the United Nations webcast.<sup>1</sup>

On the occasion of the 46<sup>th</sup> regular session of the Council (22 February-23 March 2021), DefendDefenders (our ECOSOC name is: *East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project*) registered to take the floor during five debates.

On 15 March 2021, during the general debate on agenda item 4, we delivered a pre-recorded video statement<sup>2</sup> raising concern over the human rights and humanitarian situation in Cameroon. We stressed that “Cameroon is among the human rights crises this Council has been unable or unwilling to adequately address. Being a member of the Council should not shield a State from scrutiny.” We concluded by calling on Member and Observer States to “make clear that should Cameroon fail to take concrete steps to improve its human rights situation, they will stand ready to take action.”

Our statement was perfectly in line with the topic being discussed and the object of agenda item 4. It is the Council’s established practice that stakeholders are free to raise any situation of human rights under this agenda item’s general debate. We used language that is in line with the practice of agenda item 4, maintained a balance between alleged violations committed by the Government of Cameroon and abuses by non-State actors, and called on the Council to exercise its mandate to address the situation in the country. We reiterated the concerns raised by a range of independent actors and referred to figures by United Nations agencies, including the High Commissioner for Refugees.



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Our statement came after numerous meetings with State delegations, independent experts, and United Nations officials (including H.E. Mr. António Guterres, Secretary-General, whom we met in February 2020 during the 43<sup>rd</sup> session's High-Level Segment), during which we raised Cameroon's situation and encouraged more scrutiny.

Our video statement was played between 10:00 and 13:00. When the session resumed, at 15:00, the Permanent Representative of Cameroon, H.E. Mr. Salomon Eheth, took the floor to exercise a right of reply.

Although Mr. Eheth mentioned the "Association France Ethiopie Corne de l'Afrique," which is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) registered in France (that NGO is not in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and did not deliver any statement during the session), but may also be deliberate mischaracterisation of our organisation, we understood that he in fact referred to our statement. The Council's Secretariat confirmed to us that it was most probably the case, as (i) we are the only NGO including "Horn of Africa" in its name that took the floor, (ii) no NGO that includes "Ethiopia" in its name took the floor; and (iii) we are the only NGO to have raised Cameroon in a statement during that general debate. Other States' representatives reached out to us after the debate, enquiring about Cameroon's attack. Mr. Eheth accused our organisation of the following:

- *Financing terrorism;*
- *Having "mastered the art of spreading hatred and lies";*
- *Advocating terrorism; and*
- *Being responsible for "several assassinations, kidnappings, attacks and destruction of property in Cameroon."*

Mr. Eheth also declared that:

- *Our organisation does not "deserve to address our Council; It is an NGO whose members sow horror and desolation in Cameroon"; and*
- *"We must stop giving status to this kind of NGO without audience, which are manipulated, to denigrate states and politicize our work."*

Mr. Eheth concluded by saying that: "Cameroon calls on the countries which harbor these terrorists, in particular those of the NGO 'Association France Ethiopia Horn of Africa' [sic] which destabilize the North-West and South-West regions [of Cameroon], to stop this sinister support, and to act in accordance with their national laws and the relevant international instruments for combating terrorism."

These allegations are grave, absurd, preposterous, and defamatory. Cameroon's statement goes beyond what constitutes an acceptable statement exercised as part of a right of reply. It departs from the usual practice of rights of reply and uses language that is threatening and disproportionate.

While we do not wish to address the substance of these allegations, we highlight that we are a recognised civil society organisation with over 15 institutional and private sources of funding, including from Governments of Member States of the United Nations. A regional NGO founded in 2005 and based in Kampala, Uganda, we are today one of the largest African human rights NGOs. We coordinate the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network (AfricanDefenders), which brings together five sub-regional networks covering the entirety of the African continent, with hundreds of human rights defenders and organisations as members. We established an office in Geneva in 2018.

We consider that the statement delivered by the Permanent Representative of Cameroon amounts to an act of intimidation and reprisal, for the following reasons:



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1. Its link to our engagement and cooperation with the United Nations in the field of human rights is clear: Cameroon's statement was delivered as a right of reply to our statement, and it was clearly announced as such;
2. It contains an implicit call for the removal of our consultative status with ECOSOC;
3. Beyond constituting intimidation and reprisal against the staff member who delivered the statement, it aims to punish DefendDefenders and partners, including members of AfricanDefenders, for reporting on the human rights situation in Cameroon and calling on the Council to address it adequately;
4. The allegations presented were never made before, either by the Government of Cameroon or by any other actor or institution, for instance the country's judiciary. While Cameroon accused a number of humanitarian and human rights NGOs of "supporting terrorism" in the past (notably during the 43<sup>rd</sup> session's general debate under item 4), it is the first time that Cameroon has made the abovementioned accusations against DefendDefenders, at the national or international levels. It made these accusations immediately after our statement; and
5. With regard to its defamatory character, as per the usual definition of defamation in tort law, it is a false statement that unjustly harms our reputation; it could not possibly have been made in good faith and with reasonable belief that it was true.

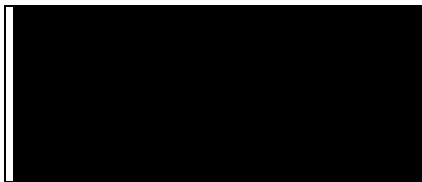
We consider that Cameroon acting as Coordinator of the Group of African States for the year 2021 is an aggravating factor, as we, as well as NGO colleagues, regularly participate in negotiations led by the Africa Group.

We also consider that this behaviour is unacceptable for an elected Member of the Council.

**I therefore respectfully ask you, as the President of the Council, to raise the incident with the Permanent Representative of Cameroon, as well as publicly; to condemn the State's behaviour; to remind the Cameroonian Government of its international legal obligations, including its obligations as a Member of the Council; and to reiterate the right of duly-accredited representatives of civil society to participate in the work of the Council free from intimidation and reprisals, as well as the unacceptable character of reprisals.**

I stand ready to provide you with any further information.

Yours sincerely,



<sup>1</sup> Video recording available at: <http://webtv.un.org/watch/item4-general-debate-contd-35th-meeting-46th-regular-session-human-rights-council/6240673803001/#player> (chapter 20). Cameroon's statement is also available on the HRC extranet.

<sup>2</sup> The statement is available on the HRC extranet and at: <https://defenddefenders.org/defenddefenders-oral-statements-at-hrc46/>