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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 76/171. It outlines the work of the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa from 1 August 2021 to 31 July 2023. It also describes the challenges faced by the Centre and opportunities for further engagement in the subregion.

* A/78/150.
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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 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, the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe.

3. The present report focuses on the activities of the Centre between 1 August 2021 and 31 July 2023. The Centre’s ability to reach out to right holders in the subregion, particularly those most vulnerable, was hampered by the security situation, the increasing cost of goods and services and budget constraints. As a result, the Centre focused its efforts on critical activities.


5. In accordance with the mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 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, regional organizations including ECCAS, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations, media, United Nations country teams, the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa and other partners.

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

A. Political and security developments

6. Various events in the Central African subregion have shaped the political landscape, including elections taking place in certain countries and constitutional and electoral reforms, as well as the arrest of opposition party members and human rights defenders and the killing of journalists. Those events were accompanied by political tension, ongoing security crises and economic instability, challenges in the recovery efforts from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the impact of armed conflicts. This has had negative effects on the human rights situation, resulting in the continued shrinking of the democratic space, with an increase in attacks on journalists and human rights defenders, allegations of arbitrary killings, torture and ill-treatment, inhumane detention conditions, arbitrary arrests and detention, among other

1 See, for example, S/2023/108 and S/2023/451, respectively.
violations. Economic, social and cultural rights have been seriously affected owing to the rise in the prices of basic commodities caused by supply chain disruptions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the effects of conflicts.

7. In Burundi, the ruling party, Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie – Forces pour la défense de la démocratie (CNDD-FDD), held its statutory congress on 22 January 2023 in Gitega, where new party leaders were appointed. The incumbent Secretary-General of CNDD-FDD was reappointed.

8. There have been reports by national and international human rights non-governmental organizations of the arbitrary arrest and detention of opposition members, human rights defenders and journalists within the reporting period. In December 2021, the National Independent Human Rights Commission released a statement regarding alleged cases of torture by the Service national de renseignement. The Human Rights Commission indicated that the Service national de renseignement had initiated judicial proceedings to hold the perpetrators to account and called on the relevant judicial bodies to investigate the alleged cases of torture and take adequate actions. On 14 and 15 February 2023, five members of civil society organizations, including three women, were arrested by the Service national de renseignement on charges of “undermining the internal security of the State, rebellion and undermining the proper functioning of the national economy”. Three out of the five were acquitted on 28 April, while two others were convicted of rebellion and sentenced to a fine and a two-year suspended sentence. Certain human rights non-governmental organizations considered the judicial proceedings and decisions flawed and inconsistent with the right to a fair trial. On 2 May 2023, the Court of Appeal in Bujumbura sentenced a journalist to 10 years in prison and a fine on charges of undermining the internal security and national integrity of the State. A large number of human rights non-governmental organizations described the case as arbitrary.

9. In Cameroon, on 12 March 2023, senatorial elections were held in all 10 administrative regions. Ten political parties contested and the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement won all 70 seats. In the North-West and South-West regions, the elections were convened amid serious security threats from armed separatist groups which threatened to impede the voting. On 31 March 2023, the President of Cameroon, Paul Biya, signed a decree by which 30 other senators were appointed, as provided in the electoral law. Five of the 30 senators appointed were from opposition political parties. Currently, the Senate has 33 women members, accounting for 33 per cent of the total number of senators, a notable increase from 26 per cent during the previous term. The party of the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement now holds 98 per cent of Senate seats.

10. On 27 December 2021, the Yaoundé Military Tribunal convicted and sentenced 50 members of opposition political parties and movements to from one to seven years of imprisonment for “insurrection”, “rebellion” and “endangering State security”. These included members of the collective Stand up for Cameroon and 40 members of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement, who had been arrested on 22 September 2020 in the context of an unauthorized demonstration against what the demonstrators termed as “a lack of concrete action to address the ongoing crisis in the North-West and South-West regions; and failure to revise the electoral code before the regional elections held on 6 December 2020”. In the reporting period, several civil society organizations and human rights defenders denounced allegations of misappropriation of public funds by national authorities. They subsequently faced human rights violations and abuses, including acts of killing, death threats, intimidation and

2 See http://www.cnidh.bi/documents/Communiqu%C3%A9%20relatif%20a%20cas%20de%20torture%20signal%C3%A9s%20au%20SNR.pdf.
restrictions on their freedom of expression. The kidnapping and subsequent murder of radio journalist Arsène Salomon Mbami Zogo, also known as Martinez Zogo, constitute a prominent example. On 27 January 2023, following the confirmation of the killing, the President instructed the competent authorities to undertake prompt and thorough investigations into the case. According to the findings of those national investigations, members of the intelligence services and influential businessman were involved. They were arrested, charged with “hunting, abduction, torture and complicity of torture” and detained at Kondengui central prison in Yaoundé. Furthermore, on 7 May 2023, Nsoh Anyembe Nde, a journalist, was killed in Bamenda, North-West Region, allegedly by members of armed separatist groups, according to a video published online.

11. Cameroon continued to face three simultaneous security crises: protracted fighting between security and defence forces and armed separatist groups in the North-West and South-West regions, attacks by Boko Haram affiliated and splinter groups in the Far North Region and the spillover effects from the crisis in the Central African Republic. These situations have had severe human rights impacts, have exacerbated vulnerabilities and reduced civic space and have caused large-scale displacement. In the North-West and South-West regions, human rights violations and abuses were reportedly committed during operations of security and defence forces against armed separatist groups. Allegations of summary executions and arbitrary arrests and detention and attacks directed against property and education⁴ and health-care facilities, as well as kidnapping and extortion and hate speech, remained prevalent in the reporting period. On 29 May 2022, armed separatist groups reportedly killed at least 15 persons and wounded about 60 others in Kajifu and Obonyi communities in Akwaya subdivision, Manyu division, South-West Region, to enforce payment of a monthly levy that they had imposed on the locals. On 1 June 2022, four members of the security and defence forces allegedly shot and killed nine persons (including four women and an 18-month-old girl) and wounded a one-year-old girl in Missong, Fungom subdivision, Menchum division, North-West Region. Investigations into this incident are ongoing. On 16 July 2023, an armed separatist group reportedly shot and killed 10 persons, including three women, and wounded 2 others at Nacho Junction, Bamenda II Council area, Mezam division, North-West Region. On 20 May 2023, about 30 women over age 50 were reportedly kidnapped⁶ and beaten by members of an armed separatist group in Big Babanki, Tubah district, Mezam division, North-West Region. In the Far North Region, the security threat from Boko Haram and Da’esh West Africa Province continued, with related concerns of summary executions, arbitrary arrests and detentions, kidnappings and the increasing use of improvised explosive devices, as well as land-related intercommunal clashes.⁷

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4 On 2 December 2021, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that over 700,000 children had been impacted by school closures due to violence in the two regions. See https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/cameroon.
5 On 9 June 2022, suspected armed separatist fighters reportedly set fire to the general hospital in Mamfe, Manyu division, South-West Region. In February 2023 alone, eight attacks on education facilities and two attacks on health-care facilities were reported in the North-West and South-West regions. About 54 per cent of schools remain closed in the North-West and South-West regions. See https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-humanitarian-dashboard-january-march-2023.
6 They were reportedly later released, on 24 May 2023.
7 In December 2021, land-related intercommunal clashes between the Choa Arabs and the Mousgoun in the departments of Logone-and-Chari and Mayo-Danay, Far North Region, led to the killing of 44 persons, the wounding of 100 others and the displacement of at least 27,800 persons, as reported by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). See www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/clashes-cameroons-far-north-displace-more-100000-people.
affecting mostly the Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga departments. In the Eastern Region of Cameroon, the country is still impacted by the Central African Republic refugee crisis, with 350,428 refugees from the Central African Republic hosted in the region.  

12. In Chad, in accordance with the recommendations of the National and Sovereign Dialogue, held from 20 August to 10 October 2022, the national commission in charge of organizing the constitutional referendum was set up in January 2023 with a mandate to organize, supervise and control the conduct of the next constitutional referendum. An ad hoc commission responsible for drafting the preliminary constitution was also set up in January 2023. The constitutional referendum is expected to be held in November 2023 and the general elections are planned for 2024. Following the killing of dozens of people during demonstrations on 20 October 2022, impartial, prompt, effective and independent investigations are yet to be conducted by the State. While the National Human Rights Commission in its report published on 21 February 2023 indicated that 128 persons had been killed, the authorities reported at least 50 persons killed. The Sudan crisis has resulted in a large flow of refugees to Chad, while cross-border movements between the Central African Republic and Chad continued.

13. In the Congo, the Government organized its legislative and local elections on 4 and 10 July 2022. The ruling Parti congolais du travail won 103 of the 151 seats in the national assembly, thereby retaining control over the assembly. Although a large segment of the opposition boycotted the elections, citing irregularities, African Union and ECCAS observation missions noted that the elections were held in an improved environment compared with that of the 2017 legislative elections, owing partly to the economic recovery and an overall stable internal security context. The Centre received allegations from civil society organizations of arbitrary arrests and detention by security forces during the electoral period.

14. Following the elections, opposition parties called for the holding of an inclusive national dialogue, as well as the release of “political prisoners”, including General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko and André Okombi Salissa, former minister in different capacities from 2002 to 2012, who were imprisoned following the contested 2016 presidential election. On 1 December 2022, the leader of the opposition group Mouvement Républicain, Destin Gavet, was arrested by security forces in Pointe-Noire after initiating a petition calling for the release of General Mokoko and Mr. Salissa and was later released. A media channel (VOX TV) which had made a similar call was suspended by the Congolese Superior Council on Freedom of Communication in December 2022 for disseminating information susceptible to “disturb[ing] public order”. This suspension was lifted after seven days, following advocacy by non-governmental organizations and the United Nations.

15. Sao Tome and Principe, on 25 September 2022, held its legislative, local and regional elections which served as a crucial test for the country following the disputes that had arisen after the first round of the 2021 presidential election. The elections were conducted in a calm atmosphere without any major incident. On 25 November 2022, the Prime Minister, Patrice Trovoada, announced that the security forces had thwarted an attack on the country’s military barracks carried out by four people.

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8 According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. See https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-humanitarian-dashboard-january-march-2023?_gl=1*1phh4bi*_ga*NDKzMjg0NDgxLjE2ODE2NDM2NTI._ga_E60ZNX2F68*MTY4OTI3NzQ4MS43LjEuMTY4OTI3NzkwMi40OC4wLjA.
Several people were subsequently arrested and detained by the security and defence forces; five were reportedly subjected to torture, four of whom died in custody. Those arrested included the former President of the National Assembly, Delfim Neves, and a member of Movement for the Liberation of Sao Tome and Principe. The Centre received disturbing images and videos circulated on social media showing the battered bodies of some of the assailants, which led to public demands for a thorough investigation into the incident. The authorities subsequently initiated investigations.

16. OHCHR conducted an assessment mission to Sao Tome and Principe from 7 to 14 December 2022. Various human rights violations were documented and other challenges were identified, notably the dysfunction of the judicial and the penitentiary systems. The mission strongly recommended that the Government carry out investigations and hold the perpetrators accountable. From 8 to 19 April 2023, the United Nations and ECCAS conducted a strategic assessment mission focused on the justice and security sectors of Sao Tome and Principe. The members of the mission team met with relevant stakeholders, shared their concerns and made recommendations.

17. In Gabon, the Government held a political consultation from 13 to 23 February 2023 with the opposition segments on the revision of the Constitution. Following the consultation, on 23 March 2023, the National Assembly of Gabon adopted a draft bill on the revision of the Constitution, which was approved by the parliamentary congress on 6 April 2023. The bill amends some provisions of the Constitution, including articles 4, 9, 10, 11 and 15. However, issues such as the status of the opposition, electoral redistricting and reform of the Gabonese Electoral Commission remained unresolved.

18. In Equatorial Guinea, general elections were held on 20 November 2022. The incumbent President, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, won a sixth consecutive term and was sworn in on 25 January 2023. The ruling party, Partido Democrático de Guinea Equatorial, won 100 per cent of the seats in the legislative and local elections. On 31 January 2023, Manuela Roka Botey was appointed Prime Minister, the first woman to hold that position. Four of the 32 ministries are led by women.

19. The restricted democratic space in Equatorial Guinea shrunk further in the context of the elections, with a crackdown on the opposition and an already weak civil society. Some 30 leaders and members of the Citizens for Innovation party were convicted and sentenced to prison terms of between 9 and 29 years for illegal association and meetings, illegal possession of weapons and ammunition, assaulting law enforcement agents, causing severe injuries, and murder. Gabriel Nse Obiang, an opposition leader, was arrested on 30 September 2022, together with 150 of his supporters in a police operation. About 200 supporters were barricaded at the headquarters of the Citizens for Innovation party, which was dissolved in February 2018. According to the authorities, a police officer was shot and killed during the operation. Civil society organizations reported the death of opposition leader Julio Obama Mefuman, in Mongomo on 15 January 2023, under unclear circumstances. From 4 to 10 February 2023, the Centre carried out a support mission to reinforce its engagement to assist the Government in its commitment to fulfilling its international human rights obligations. On 26 June 2023, Mr. Nse Obiang was convicted and sentenced to 29 years and six months in prison by a military court in Malabo for “homicide, abuse of fundamental rights, insult to security forces and illegal possession of ammunition”.

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20. In Rwanda, on 31 March 2023, the Chamber of Deputies adopted the relevance of the draft revision of the Constitution initiated by the President. On 2 June 2023, the plenary sitting of the Senate unanimously adopted the revision of the Constitution, paving the way for the holding of the elections of the President and members of Parliament on the same day. On 2 April 2023, the President was re-elected with 99.8 per cent of the vote for a five-year term as the head of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front during the thirty-fifth International Congress of the party.

B. Social and economic challenges

21. The present political situation, as well as the recurrent security crises along with climate change challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have adversely impacted the socioeconomic situation in the subregion, with severe implications for fiscal space, retrogression in economic and social rights and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, which the United Nations and the African Union agreed should be guided by both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. The combined impact of the crises has caused trade disruptions; spikes in the price of food, fuel and fertilizers; and a rise in extreme poverty.

22. In the past two years, prices of basic food items, fuel and construction material have risen, as a result of supply chain disruptions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and effects of conflict. Fuel shortages have been experienced in most countries in the region. In Burundi, in May 2022, the Ministry of Transport revised the fuel and public transport prices upward by nearly 30 per cent. Similarly, in the Congo and Cameroon, in 2022, despite the Governments’ initial efforts to introduce subsidies, prices of public transport rose, following shortages in fuel and increases in prices of basic commodities. With the outbreak of the conflict in the Sudan, food supply routes to the Central African Republic and Chad have been seriously disrupted, leading to a spike in commodity prices and aggravating pre-existing food price inflation, water scarcity and food insecurity. Large numbers of refugees from the Sudan in the Central African Republic are living in flood-prone areas such as Am-Dafock, which are often inaccessible to humanitarian assistance, especially in the rainy season. This impacts those refugees’ right to food and access to social services.

23. Public debt remained a key concern in the subregion. As of 2022, according to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund debt sustainability analyses, two of the countries in the subregion, the Congo and Sao Tome and Principe, were in debt distress, while Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Chad are at high risk of debt distress. Debt servicing also continues to divert already scarce resources from sustainable development in the region. With respect to the debt vulnerabilities, the default policy advice has entailed fiscal consolidation. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, more than half of the countries in the region are now introducing austerity measures in the form of reduction in expenditure (including for social services such as health care and education) and increases in taxes to maintain sufficient external reserves and ensure debt servicing capacity. The severe effects of austerity measures

13 See www.parliament.gov.rw/news-detail?tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=28499&cHash=1d7e4083ab236a58edbe932325bb7621.
on vulnerable groups and women can lead to economic insecurity and further retrogression in economic and social rights.

III. Governments’ responses to the human rights challenges

24. In Cameroon, the Government continues to implement some of the recommendations made by OHCHR following the deployment of a human rights assessment team from 5 to 26 September 2019 to assess the human rights situation in the North-West and South-West regions. One of the recommendations is to facilitate regular visits to places of detention by the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms and OHCHR. In May 2022, the Centre strengthened the capacities of 47 officials of the new Commission, with the Commission being designated to serve as the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture under Law No. 2019/014. The Centre is committed to beginning the practice of joint visits to detention centres with the Commission. While the Centre is mindful of the complex security situation, further advocacy by the Centre is ongoing through continuing regular assessment missions to the North-West and South-West regions. The Centre has continued to implement capacity-building activities in the two regions with State institutions, including the judiciary and law enforcement officials.

25. In Cameroon, in January 2023, in response to the confirmed killing of radio journalist Arsène Salomon Mbami Zogo, the President, taking an important step towards accountability, instructed competent authorities to investigate the incident.

26. In December 2021, Cameroon passed Law No. 2021/018 on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, under which the President was authorized to ratify the Convention. The Centre is currently implementing a project in collaboration with the Government in line with the provisions of the Convention.

27. On 24 June 2022, the National Assembly of Sao Tome and Principe adopted Equality Law No. 11/2022 on parity, which entered into force in November 2022. The implementation of this legislation, along with the existing law on political parties, is expected to contribute to gender equality in political offices and result in increased representation of women.

28. In the Congo, on 3 August 2022, the Council of Ministers adopted the draft decree on the creation, powers, organization and functioning of the Inter-institutional Technical Committee for the Eradication of Statelessness in the Congo. The adoption of the decree follows the ratification by the Congo in 2019 of the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

29. In September 2021, Gabon passed Law No. 006/2021, relating to the elimination of violence against women. Following this enactment, the Government, through the Ministry of Justice, embarked on a campaign to disseminate and raise awareness on the law through training sessions for judicial police officers and civil society organizations.

30. On 21 September 2022, Gabon ratified the Arms Trade Treaty. As a State party, Gabon undertook to regulate transfers of conventional arms, their ammunition, parts and components, to mitigate the risks associated with transfers and uncontrolled uses of arms that fuel wars and conflicts and consequently increase human rights violations and abuses.

31. In Equatorial Guinea, the death penalty was removed from the Penal Code. The new Penal Code, approved by Law No. 4/2022 of 17 August 2022 and signed by the President on 7 September 2022, entered into force on 10 December 2022. However,
the death penalty is still enshrined in the Constitution, which makes its applicability possible. The Centre is following up on this issue with the authorities.

IV. Activities of the Centre from 1 August 2021 to 31 July 2023

32. In the context of the aforementioned challenges, the Centre conducted activities in support of State authorities in upholding their human rights obligations and empowering national human rights institutions and civil society actors. The Centre reflected on ways to further advance the human rights agenda in the subregion by leveraging its comparative advantage and building partnerships. Throughout the reporting period, the Centre notably strengthened its collaboration with United Nations entities, with a particular emphasis on its partnership with the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa. This close cooperation resulted in the implementation of joint activities aimed at addressing critical issues, including strengthening early warning mechanisms and concerted efforts to combat hate speech. However, the Centre received many more requests from States, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations and United Nations country teams, as well as opportunities for engagements, which it could not meet or accept owing to staffing and resource constraints.

A. Strengthening the rule of law and accountability

1. Strengthening the capacity of national human rights institutions

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

34. In Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe, the Centre obtained pledges of commitment from national authorities to establish national human rights institutions that meet international standards through workshops organized in May and October 2022. Road maps for their establishment were developed and adopted and implementation is under way.

35. The Centre strengthened the capacities of existing national human rights institutions in Central Africa through two annual subregional workshops aimed at sensitizing participants on the criteria and conditions under which a national human rights institution is determined to be in accordance with international standards and the role of such institutions in monitoring human rights during an electoral process. Road maps defining further steps towards continued strengthening of their capacities in line with international standards were also adopted. Subregional workshops were held from 10 to 12 November 2021 in Gabon and from 14 to 16 December 2022 in Cameroon.

36. In Cameroon, the Centre strengthened the capacities of 47 officials of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission on the functioning of the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture through a workshop organized on 24 and 25 May 2022 in Yaoundé. The main objective of the workshop was to provide the officials of the Commission with the necessary tools for familiarizing themselves with the instruments and mechanisms for the prevention of torture and good practices in fulfilling their mandate.

37. In Gabon, upon the request of the National Commission on Human Rights, the Centre strengthened the capacities of 50 members of the Commission and members of civil society organizations on their role and responsibility during electoral
processes and on the integration of human rights in the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery plans through training sessions organized in May and August 2022.

38. In Chad, OHCHR provided technical assistance to the National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up and strengthened its functional and operational capacities by providing its secretariat with the appropriate equipment and materials. The support provided by OHCHR has enabled the National Mechanism to better engage with international human rights mechanisms and to reduce its backlog. As a result, the National Mechanism produced the initial report on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the tenth report on the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the third periodic report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as the fifth report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

39. In Rwanda, in partnership with the Senior Human Rights Adviser in the Resident Coordinator Office, the Centre strengthened the capacity of the members and staff of the National Commission for Human Rights of Rwanda on the “techniques of human rights monitoring and reporting” in a workshop in Musanze organized from 14 to 16 December 2021. The workshop, which was attended by 35 participants, including 21 women, was aimed at enhancing their skills and competences in collecting and documenting information related to human rights violations and abuses.

2. Strengthening the capacity of other institutions

40. In Cameroon, upon the request of the National Assembly of Cameroon, the Centre built the capacity of 30 members of the Constitutional Law and Human Rights Commission of the National Assembly through a presentation on the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and its implementation.

41. In Burundi, from 28 to 31 March 2022, the Centre supported the Association NTABARIZA in organizing two awareness-raising and capacity-building sessions for penitentiary personnel on COVID-19 pandemic preventive measures in detention settings and the protection of the rights of detainees in the context of the pandemic.

42. In Cameroon, the Centre, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, enhanced the capacity of military and civilian magistrates and lawyers in the application of international human rights law and international humanitarian law and principles on the protection of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system. Four training sessions were held in different regions of Cameroon from 2021 to 2022. A training of trainers session on the same subject and for the same audience was organized in Gabon from 15 to 17 November 2021.

43. Within the framework of the Office on Counter-Terrorism project on human rights, the rule of law and the fight against terrorism, the Centre organized and coordinated three training sessions for Cameroonian law enforcement personnel. The activities, implemented in partnership with the national expert group on human rights and counter-terrorism, aimed towards promoting respect for human rights in counter-terrorism operations in Cameroon. The national expert group was commissioned in 2021 following a series of training of trainers sessions held between 2018 and 2020. From January to March 2022, the Centre and the Office on Counter-Terrorism organized a training session on integrating human rights in countering terrorism for military officers at the Combined Services Military Academy, law enforcement officers at the International School of Security Forces and pupil Magistrates at the National School of Administration and Magistracy in Yaoundé.
B. Protecting civic space and people’s participation

1. Inclusive participation in political life

44. In Cameroon, the Centre obtained the commitment of the Government and its national and international partners, through a statement, to include women in situations of vulnerability in all COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery plans that affect their rights. This was the result of a high-level workshop on their participation and inclusion in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related recovery plans, organized in Yaoundé on 25 and 26 August 2021. Fifty-five persons attended the workshop, including the Minister of Social Affairs and the Minister of Women’s Empowerment and the Family and 39 women representing the Network of Women Parliamentarians and civil society organizations promoting the rights of persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS and internally displaced persons.

45. In Gabon, the electoral management body, ministries and journalists promised to consider the rights of vulnerable groups in electoral processes and address accessibility issues faced by persons with disabilities in the context of the upcoming 2023 presidential election. This was the result of a training of trainers workshop to support and encourage participation of all groups in political life, organized jointly by the Centre and the Resident Coordinator Office in Libreville on 28 and 29 June 2022. The actors discussed international standards and human rights norms related to elections and shared good practices for guaranteeing the participation of women, persons with disabilities and indigenous people in elections.

46. In Cameroon, the Centre enhanced the knowledge and reporting skills of media professionals in the context of reporting on the rights of minorities, particularly linguistic minorities. This was the result of a two-day workshop organized in Douala on 26 and 27 October 2022. Recommendations were adopted on the dissemination of laws protecting minority rights, increasing the use of local languages, using the media to enhance accountability of Governments and amplifying their voices through positive stories.

47. In Cameroon, in Yaoundé on 1 and 2 November 2022, the Centre built the capacities of various actors, including members of indigenous communities, members of civil society organizations, members of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission and officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, as well as staff of United Nations entities, on indigenous peoples’ rights and advocacy techniques. The objective of the workshop was to promote indigenous peoples’ rights, identify major challenges affecting indigenous peoples in Cameroon and propose solutions. A set of recommendations was adopted by the participants to improve the respect for human rights of indigenous peoples in Cameroon, increase their representation in decision-making bodies and enhance the availability of data on the challenges faced. The implementation of the recommendations has started, as the mapping of the existing indigenous organizations was completed in April 2023.

2. Respect for freedom of opinion and expression

48. On 21 September 2022, in its efforts to contribute to the expansion of democratic space, the Centre supported the creation of a human rights and democracy forum in Cameroon with the aim of promoting civil liberties in democratic processes. The creation of the forum was agreed following a round table on the role of the media in democratic processes, organized by the Centre in cooperation with the national Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Justice of Cameroon, in commemoration of the International Day of Democracy. Participants included actors involved in the media and electoral process, including the electoral management body,
ministries, journalists and the media regulatory body, among others. The round table aimed towards creating a space for exchange and dialogue among the different stakeholders on the challenges of the media in promoting democracy.

49. The Centre contributed to the drafting of the regional strategy for the prevention of and the fight against hate speech in Central Africa through two regional forums. In Bangui, from 26 to 29 April 2022, the Centre, in collaboration with the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa, MONUSCO, MINUSCA and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, jointly organized a regional forum to raise awareness and enhance the capacities of digital media professionals on the prevention of conflicts related to hate speech and the fight against hate speech in the subregion. The forum provided a platform for reflecting on how to develop a regional strategy to prevent and fight against hate speech in Central Africa. Participants from 10 countries attended the forum. A follow-up forum was organized in Kinshasa from 21 to 24 June 2022, which resulted in the adoption of a draft regional strategy for the prevention of and the fight against hate speech in Central Africa. Between 3 and 7 July 2023, a follow-up regional activity was organized on actions for the adoption of the strategy.

3. **Integrating human rights into sustainable development**

50. Through technical cooperation and capacity-building activities, the Centre built the capacities of States to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in a manner that is consistent with their respective obligations under international human rights law.

51. With the support of the OHCHR Surge Initiative, two subprojects, related to the right to reproductive health in Cameroon and debt, austerity and human rights, were implemented by the Centre, in the context of the implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic project aimed at “integrating human rights into the COVID-19 response and recovery and addressing the social and economic impacts of the pandemic in Central Africa”.

52. The right to sexual and reproductive health project, which was implemented by the Centre in close collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the National Institute of Statistics and Finance, the United Nations Population Fund and two civil society organizations, assessed the right to health in the East and North regions of the country. In the project report, recommendations were made for the Government to, inter alia, improve the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality constitutive elements of sexual and reproductive health services, including for women suffering from obstetric fistula and women living with HIV; to increase the health sector budget; and to increase the number of health professionals operating in the health facilities in the two regions. It was recommended that the Ministry of Public Health adopt new maternal health registers which would allow for the collection of disaggregated statistical data to account for the needs of women and girls of reproductive age in vulnerable situations. Other recommendations were related to the integration by the Government and its partners of modules on human rights-based and Leaving No One Behind approaches in health programming and service delivery in the training curricula for health personnel; and the integration of a human rights-based approach to data collection and management within the programmes and projects of the National Statistics Office.

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16 Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe.


18 See A/HRC/51/9.
53. On debt austerity and human rights, the Centre engaged with United Nations country teams in Burundi, Cameroon, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe to discuss their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, their engagement with international financial institutions and potential interest in developing joint programmes or common positions on the human rights impacts of debt, austerity measures and programmes of international financial institutions in their respective countries. The Centre contributed to a joint United Nations analysis of the 2022 budget of Cameroon, incorporating specific human rights standards relating to the State’s obligations to fulfil its minimum core obligations linked to the right to health.

54. In Cameroon, the Centre, in collaboration with OHCHR, strengthened the capacities of members of the Cameroon Human Rights Commission and staff of the National Statistics Office to better integrate human rights-based and Leaving No One Behind approaches for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 3 on education and health, respectively. This was conducted through a training and experience sharing workshop organized in Kribi from 9 to 11 May 2022.

55. In Burundi, the Congo and Gabon, the Centre, in partnership with the respective Resident Coordinator Offices and government actors, supported the integration of human rights in the common country analyses and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks of Burundi, the Congo and Gabon. This was the result of capacity-building activities for government officials and United Nations country teams on human rights-based and Leaving No One Behind approaches in the post-COVID-19 pandemic programming organized in May 2022 in the Congo and in June 2022 in Burundi and Gabon.

56. In the Congo, the Centre engaged members of the national human rights institution, officials from public administrations and leaders of civil society organizations in integrating human rights in the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery plans through two information and training sessions, held in Brazzaville from 10 to 16 September 2021.

57. In Equatorial Guinea, the Centre supported the Resident Coordinator and the United Nations country team in the roll-out of the Secretary General’s call to action for human rights country dialogue. The training session, held in Malabo on 7 February 2023, enabled discussions on how the United Nations country team can make use of the universal periodic review process and recommendations to advocate for the protection and promotion of human rights, notably economic, social and cultural rights, and the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals in the country.

58. Requests by States for technical advice and support in the areas of human rights and sustainable development increased significantly during the reporting period. Equally notable was the growing number of requests by United Nations country teams for inputs in country analysis in accordance with the 2020 quadrennial comprehensive policy review, under which the United Nations development system was called upon to assist States, upon request, in respecting and fulfilling their human rights obligations and commitments as a critical tool for operationalizing the pledge of Leaving No One Behind. The Centre mobilized temporary capacity to respond to the most pressing demands.
C. Early warning, prevention of violations and protection of human rights in situations of conflict and insecurity

59. Within the security and COVID-19 pandemic contexts, particularly in the second half of 2021, the Centre could conduct only a limited number of field missions owing to travel restrictions and had to rely on remote monitoring in the region to gather information and verify and follow up on allegations of human rights violations and abuses. While restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were not a major hindrance in 2022 and the first half of 2023, security restrictions continued to hamper access, especially to the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon.

60. On 19 October 2021, the Centre evaluated the early warning mechanisms in Central Africa, in collaboration with the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa and ECCAS, through a webinar organized for 40 participants, including 15 women, from the early warning mechanism for Central Africa, OHCHR and civil society organizations involved in conflict prevention in Central Africa. The participants recommended that key partnerships and collaboration be formalized to strengthen the early warning mechanism for early action in the Central African region.

61. To efficiently respond to the need to strengthen its prevention capacity, enhance the production of early warning and human rights analyses, establish the basis for targeted preventive action and offer a swift response in relation to potential, emerging or actual crises, the Centre, from 2 to 5 November 2021, in collaboration with OHCHR headquarters, strengthened the capacity of its newly established regional Emergency Response Team through an induction process which benefited from a platform of experience sharing and knowledge exchange. A specific focus was placed on the cooperation of the Centre’s Emergency Response Team with the regional economic commissions of the African Union and experience sharing, as well as inclusion of economic analysis as part of risk analysis and prevention. Since the beginning of 2023, the Centre has produced a bimonthly snapshot in which critical issues that are likely to affect the human rights situation in the subregion are analysed.

62. The Centre trained 30 people, including members of the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations for Peace and Conflict Prevention in Central Africa and members of the Early Warning Mechanism of ECCAS, through a regional workshop held in Libreville on 29 and 30 November 2021. One significant outcome of the workshop was the establishment of a working group on early warning and prevention, with a particular focus on the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and other potential or emerging crises in Central Africa. The primary objective of the early warning and prevention mechanism of Central Africa is to serve as an alert to Governments and regional organizations, national human rights institutions and United Nations entities regarding human rights trends and potential situations that could lead to human rights violations and abuses.

63. In Cameroon, the Centre supported the humanitarian country team in adopting an advocacy road map for the revision of the anti-terrorism legislation of Cameroon to enable it to address the impact of counter-terrorism measures on humanitarian action. This was the result of a workshop organized jointly with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Yaoundé on 13 December 2022 to develop a joint analysis of Law No. 2014/208 of Cameroon on anti-terrorism, (notably the provisions that impact humanitarian aid, and to ensure its compliance with international humanitarian law. The Centre presented the human rights-related analysis of the law, highlighting steps taken so far to advocate for its review. A road map was adopted which encompasses holding both formal and informal meetings with key stakeholders for the purpose of reviewing the law.
D. Implementation of the recommendations of international human rights mechanisms

64. During the reporting period, the Centre continued to assist countries of the sub-region in meeting their international human rights obligations and engaging with international human rights mechanisms. The consistent cooperation of all countries in the subregion with the universal periodic review process remained commendable.19 The Centre continued to work with relevant stakeholders to strengthen their engagement with human rights treaty bodies and special procedures.

65. On 7 April 2022, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Centre in partnership with the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Ministry of Human Rights organized a workshop for new members of the interministerial committee responsible for drafting reports and monitoring the implementation of recommendations of international human rights mechanisms. At the end of the workshop, three resolutions were adopted, covering a capacity-building plan for the interministerial committee on human rights; drafting of pending reports; and the follow-up of the integrated action plan for the implementation of the recommendations.

66. From 24 May 2022, in Sao Tome and Principe, the Centre, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, organized a workshop on the strategy for implementing the recommendations of the universal periodic review. At the end of the workshop, a road map was adopted in preparation for the fourth cycle, scheduled for January 2026. From 24 to 28 April 2023, the Centre, in collaboration with the OHCHR Human Rights Council and Treaty Mechanisms Division, provided technical assistance to the Government of Sao Tome and Principe in facilitating the drafting and presentation of the initial and periodic reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

67. In Gabon, from 19 to 22 September 2022, the Centre, in cooperation with OHCHR headquarters, the Senior Human Rights Adviser in the Congo and the Ministry of Justice of Gabon, organized a workshop on the validation of the periodic reports to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Committee against Torture and the national report to the universal periodic review. The report to the universal periodic review was presented in January 2023 and the other two reports are currently being drafted with the support of the Centre.

V. Conclusion and recommendations

68. The reporting period has been characterized by some progress but also by challenges on the political, security and human rights fronts, which have been further compounded by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflicts. This combination of factors has affected the ability of States to fulfill some of their obligations and commitments regarding good governance, accountability and the rule of law. However, countries in the subregion continue to strive to adequately meet the basic socioeconomic needs of their citizens and to boost progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2063 Agenda of the African Union.

69. During the reporting period, the capacity of the Centre to implement its mandate amid ever increasing demands for support from Member States, civil
society organizations, national human rights institutions and other stakeholders remained limited. The Centre continued to place the human rights agenda at the forefront in the subregion through productive cooperation with States and other partners.

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

71. In view of the significant human rights challenges in the subregion and the increasing requests from Governments and other partners, I reiterate my previous appeal to Member States to increase the regular budget allocation to the Centre, in particular in terms of human resources and funding for technical cooperation activities. Such additional resources would assist the Centre in contributing to bolstering national human rights protection systems and to advancing progress towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals in Central Africa, leaving no one behind.