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Submission by: Front Line Defenders – the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

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Front Line Defenders (www.frontlinedefenders.org) is an international NGO based in Ireland with special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). Founded in 2001, Front Line Defenders has particular expertise on the issue of security and protection of human rights defenders and works to promote the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders) adopted by General Assembly resolution 53/144 of 9 December 1998.

The following submission has been prepared by Front Line Defenders based on research carried out by this organisation and information received from independent human rights defenders in Cameroon from June 2018 to March 2023.

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Introduction

1. This written submission draws attention to the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Cameroon, and covers the period of June 2018 – March 2023. HRDs in Cameroon continue to face death threats, arbitrary arrests, detention, physical abuses and killings. They face reprisals for their work promoting and exercising their rights to freedom of expression, and reporting and denouncing human rights abuses.
2. During its last UPR cycle, Cameroon received 196 recommendations on ensuring protection for HRDs and journalists from the misuse of criminal laws, threats, enforced disappearances and killings with a view to bring the perpetrators of violence to justice. Although Cameroon accepted 133 of these recommendations, there have been no significant changes in the treatment of HRDs.

Inaction by the government to support HRDs and judicial harrassment

3. During the period under review, the government of Cameroon continued to deny basic protection measures for human rights defenders including the investigation of threats and attacks against them.
4. [Maximilienne Ngo Mbe](#) is the Executive Director of the Central African Network of HRDs (Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits de l'Homme de l'Afrique Centrale – REDHAC). In March 2022, Maximilienne Ngo Mbe was [called](#) to the police station to discuss REDHAC's legal status, which has happened several times before. Ms Ngo Mbe has been the subject of regular intimidation, threats and smear campaigns, specifically in relation to REDHAC's work in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, and their work with the LGBTI community. In October 2018, the woman HRD was [informed](#) that two men were monitoring her house and requesting information about her whereabouts. REDHAC filed complaints regarding attacks on their office, but none of these have been investigated by the police.
5. On 18 May 2020, a group of gendarmes went to the home of HRD and member of Tournons La Page Cameroun (TLP) [Séverin Le Juste Bikoko](#). While they were not in possession of any warrant or official document justifying their presence, the gendarmes broke down the gate and arrested him. His father, Jean-Marc Bikoko, is a HRD and focal point at national level for Dynamique Citoyenne (Dynamic Citizen), a network of Cameroonian civil society organisations that conduct independent monitoring of public policies. He reported that one of the gendarmes in charge informed him that they were hunting down bandits living in the area and that his son had refused to comply, a version denied by the witnesses present at the scene at the time of the incident. On July 27, 2020, the Yaoundé-Ekounou Court of First Instance sentenced HRD Séverin Le Juste Bikoko to a [fine](#) of 50,000 CFA francs (76 euros) and to the payment of joint and several costs of 36,550 CFA francs (56 euros) after having found him guilty of "rebellion". The appeal has been postponed over thirty times, and no new date has been scheduled.
6. [Jules Raymond Anama](#), [Christian Ouemba Kuete](#), and [Juliette Ndim Bih](#) are members of Citizen for the Cameroonian Memory (Citoyens Pour la Mémoire du Cameroun - CPMC) a youth organisation that promotes citizen participation, government accountability, and transparency. CPMC has worked to monitor and highlight human rights violations in the Anglophone region. [Yannick Mbakop](#), [Samuel Talla Giles](#), [Stanislas Tokam](#), [Herman Zebaze Takoubo](#), and [Aimé Kameni Wetchadji](#) are members of the Association for the Defence of Students' Rights in Cameroon (Association pour la Défense des Droits des Etudiants au Cameroun (ADDEC), a student association and union advocating for reforms in the Cameroonian academic system, academic freedom and participation of students in decision making. On 18 May 2019, the eight HRDs were arrested by the National Judicial Police while they were taking a selfie in front of the Central Post Office in Yaoundé. They were subsequently detained at the Intelligence Services' Office in Nlongkak-Yaoundé and

transferred to the Elig Essono National Judicial Police station on the same day. They were arrested and detained in relation to a three-day protest they were planning to demand that President Paul Biya step down. Following their arrest and detention the protest did not take place. The HRDs were denied a visit with a lawyer for the first ten days of their detention, and denied a visit from their family for the first sixteen days. The HRDs were detained for a total of 37 days before they were charged and brought before a judge. At no point during their detention did the government produce an official document authorising the extension of their detention. On 5 October 2019, the President of Cameroon, Paul Biya, ordered the [suspension](#) of all proceedings at the Military Court against human rights defenders Jules Raymond Anama, Christian Ouemba Kuete, Juliette Ndim Bih, Yannick Mbakop, Samuel Talla Giles, Stanislas Tokam, Herman Zebaze Takoubo and Aimé Kaméni Wetchadji. They were released after spending five months in prison.

7. In 2021, Senator Pierre Flambeau Ngayap [introduced](#) a bill to the Cameroon Senate on the protection of human rights defenders in the country. To date, no progress has been made on the adoption of this bill.

Attacks on journalist HRDs

8. Journalists are among the most targeted HRDs in Cameroon. Those working in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon are regularly accused of supporting the secessionist movement.
9. On 22 January 2023, investigative journalist and HRD [Martinez Zogo](#) was killed after he denounced corruption on his radio show. His body was found in Soa, a suburb of Yaounde, with signs of severe torture. On 2 February 2023, the Cameroonian government [announced](#) the arrest of several people suspected of being involved in the murder of Martinez Zogo. Several further [arrests](#) were made in connection to the murder of Mr Zogo on 6 February. On 3 February 2023, the body of journalist [Jean Jacques Ola Bebe](#) was found close to his home in Mimboman, after calling for accountability for the death of Mr Zogo, and two days after he had reported receiving death threats. The journalist was investigating the death of Martinez Zogo. He knew that he was being surveilled and that individuals were following him shortly before he was found assassinated.
10. On the night of 9 to 10 March 2022, HRD [Paul Chouta](#) was abducted by three unidentified men while watching a football game in Yaounde. He was forced into a vehicle, and tortured. The HRD was later abandoned in the middle of the night and immediately went to the hospital where he received medical treatment for the injuries he sustained. Paul Chouta is a journalist known for his work on societal issues such as the working conditions of teachers, dysfunctionality in the health sector and social injustice in Cameroon. At the time of writing, FLD does not have information about an investigation into Mr Chouta's abduction.
11. On 2 August 2019, photo journalist working for Chillen Music Television (CMTV) and HRD [Samuel Wazizi](#) was arrested, and reportedly accused of "collaborating with separatists" and "spreading separatist information", although to date no formal charges have been brought against him. The HRD was held incommunicado until his death in detention on 17 August 2019. Mr Wazizi's death was only recognized 10 months later by the Cameroonian government, on 5 June 2020, and denied evidence of torture. Mr Wazizi particularly denounced the management of the crisis in the Anglophone region in Cameroon.

Conflict-related violations

12. Since 2016, Cameroon has seen a violent and protracted conflict in the northwest anglophone part of the country, known as the ‘Anglophone Crisis’. The government security forces are accused of having committed gross human rights abuses, including killings and arbitrary arrests and for failing to protect civilians from abuses committed by Boko Haram and other armed groups. In this context, HRDs have faced abuses and repression in carrying out their human rights work such as reporting on the conflict-related human rights violations against civilians. These HRDs have faced repressions from different actors, including government authorities and armed groups. This has made it difficult for HRDs to navigate the civic environment. HRDs have been imprisoned without charge, held incommunicado, and accused of apology for terrorism, among other forms of repression.
13. The anti-terrorism law which was promulgated on 23 December 2014 allows for Cameroonian citizens to be charged in military courts and to face the death penalty for acts of terrorism, although the definition of terrorism contained within the law remains extremely vague. This law has been used against HRDs as a reprisal for their human rights work, and has resulted in particularly harsh sentences.
14. [Abdul Karim Ali](#) is a HRD promoting peace and denouncing cases of human rights violations committed in the context of the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon, and has been detained several times for this work. On 11 August 2022, the HRD was arrested without a warrant in the Ntamulung neighborhood in Bamenda, in the North-West region. The HRD was then detained incommunicado at the regional gendarmerie legion for several days. He was not allowed legal representation and a visit from family members until 13 August 2022. The HRD was told he was accused of “apology of terrorism” because he had a video showing alleged human rights abuses committed by a Cameroonian soldier against civilians in the country’s English-speaking region. However, the HRD has been detained for over six months without formal charges, in violation of international and regional human rights standards. On 7 November 2022, Mr Ali was brought to the military court in Yaoundé, but later brought back to his cell without being formally charged. In addition, the HRD has reported being placed in inhuman condition in a six-square-meter cell without windows, a toilet, or mattresses with 12 other detainees. Mr Ali remains in detention at the time of writing.
15. In 2020, the government carried out a smear campaign aimed at silencing human rights organisations and media outlets that documented a massacre of civilians in the northwest of the country (Ngarbuh) by Cameroonian security forces on 14 February 2020. In March 2020, the Minister of Territorial Administration at the time [said](#) that the organisations denouncing the massacre had received foreign funding for the purpose of destabilising Cameroon’s institutions, and diffuse disinformation to discredit the government’s management of the Anglophone Crisis. In his statement on the matter, the Minister named Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, REDHAC, and the International Crisis Group. Following international pressure, a commission of inquiry was established on 1 March 2020 to investigate the incident, 2 soldiers and a gendarme were arrested in June 2020, and a trial began in December 2020.
16. Akem Kelvin Nkwain is a human rights officer at the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA), an organization that has documented human rights violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict. In May and June 2022, Mr Nkwain [received](#) several death threats from alleged armed separatists.
17. Felix Agbor Nkongho is a human rights lawyer, Vice-President of the African Bar Association (AFBA) for Central Africa and founder of the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA). The HRD advocates for a peaceful resolution to the Anglophone Crisis. Between 29 October and 1 November 2021, Mr Agbor Nkongho [received](#) several death threats as he was attending an international conference in Canada.
18. Franklin Mowha is a human rights defender and was the national president of Frontline Fighters for Citizens Interests (FFCI). Mr. Mowha was [last seen](#) on 6 August 2018, and

declared missing later that month. Mr Mowha had reported feeling threatened by unidentified people since June 2018. There have been no updates or signs of life from Mr Mowha since August 2018, and no investigation or arrests made in connection with his disappearance. Mr Mowha was [last seen](#) in Kumba, in the anglophone region of the country, where he was on mission to document the Anglophone Crisis.

Attacks on LGBTQI+ HRDs

19. The LGBTQI+ community is particularly at risk in Cameroon, as homosexuality is explicitly criminalised under Article 347-1 of the Penal Code 2016. There was an [increase](#) in the number of arrests and abuses against LGBTQI+ people in Cameroon in 2021. All recommendations to decriminalize consensual same sex marriage and homosexuality were rejected by Cameroon after the last UPR session.
20. The government authorities do not protect LGBTQI+ individuals and organisations, and LGBTQI+ victims of violence cannot file complaints for fear of being arrested and imprisoned for homosexuality.
21. It is not possible to name LGBTQI+ HRDs at risk in this submission as there are steep risks associated with their visibility .
22. The most common threats faced by LGBTQI+ HRDs and documented by Front Line Defenders include insecurity of housing and finding office space to host their organisations. HRDs have reported being beaten in public, having their offices burned, and events obstructed by armed individuals. In addition to abuse from the government, LGBTQI+ individuals are particularly at risk of being ostracized by their families and communities.

Reccomendations

23. Front Line Defenders calls upon the member states of the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Cameroonian authorities to prioritise the protection of HRDs and in doing so to:
 - (a) Take urgent measures to put an end to the arrest and detention as well as judicial harassment against HRDs;
 - (b) Guarantee in all circumstances that all HRDs in Cameroon are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions and ensure full respect for the UN Declaration on HRDs;
 - (c) Take measures in view of adopting national legislation on the protection of HRDs;
 - (d) Review and amend the 2014 anti-terrorism law to ensure that its provisions are not used to restrict freedom of expression or association and ensure its compliance with international human rights standards;
 - (e) Ensure investigations and judicial accountability for the deaths of HRDs Martinez Zogo, Jean Jacques Ola Bebe and Samuel Wazizi, and the disappearance of HRD Franklin Mowha;
 - (f) Take measures to ensure that public officials, including members of the government, refrain from making public statements or declarations that stigmatise and undermine the legitimate role played by HRDs, and encourage public recognition of the important role they play in democratic societies;
 - (g) End the criminalisation of homosexuality by repealing Article 347-1 of the 2016 Penal Code and ensure that HRDs working on LGBTI issues can do so safely;
 - (h) Fully guarantee the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and ensure that public events and gatherings organised by human rights groups are not disrupted;
 - (i) Effectively address threats, attacks, harassment and intimidation against HRDs, including, where applicable, by thoroughly, promptly and independently investigating

human rights violations and abuses against them and bringing the suspected perpetrators to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty, and providing effective remedies and adequate reparations to the victims;

- (j) Ensure that the judicial system is not misused to target or harass HRDs and refrain from bringing criminal charges or any other proceedings or administrative measures against them that stem solely from the peaceful exercise of their rights.