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Cameroon: Security forces must respect human rights in reaction to political demonstrations

At least three people were killed and nine injured on 1 October 2001 after gendarmerie and police used firearms to disperse a non-violent demonstration of reportedly more than 500 people in Kumbo, North West Province. Government spokespersons justified the killings as a security force reaction to "provocations" by the demonstrators.

Amnesty International calls upon the Cameroonian authorities to prevent the use of violence or lethal force against peaceful demonstrations. The security forces should comply with international standards governing the conduct of law enforcement officials and the use of force and firearms. Lethal force must be targeted only against individuals who are posing an imminent danger to life.

In Bamenda, North West Province, another peaceful demonstration involving several hundred people was broken up by the security forces and 19 people were arrested. More than 100 people were reportedly arrested in the North West and South West Provinces and remain in detention in relation to the 1 October demonstrations.

Among those detained in Bamenda are prominent activists of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) and the Southern National Youth League (SCYL), including **Nfor Ngala Nfor, Martin Luma, Frida Litongo, Chief Ayamba** and **James Sam Sabum**. The SCNC and SCYL are campaigning for greater political autonomy or secession of the English-speaking provinces.

On the same day, the editor of the Douala based *La Nouvelle Expression* newspaper, Jean-Marc Soboth, was arrested and questioned by police in Douala over the sources of information he used for an article published on 24 September on planned state response to the expected demonstrations. He was released without charge late Monday evening.

Amnesty International urges the authorities to respect rights of freedom of association and expression. People exercising these rights are not to be arbitrarily detained. They should be released if they are not promptly charged with a recognizable criminal offence and should be protected against ill-treatment.

Background

On occasion of the 40th anniversary of the positive outcome of the referendum on a union of English- and French-speaking parts of Cameroon in the English-speaking provinces on 1 October 1961, political groups throughout the English-speaking Southwest and Northwest provinces called for demonstrations to protest against, what they claim is, marginalisation in national politics and to demand greater political rights. Public demonstrations calling for greater autonomy or secession of the English-speaking provinces had been banned before 1 October 2001 and presence of security forces had been increased significantly.

Over the last decades feelings of political marginalisation and discrimination have grown stronger in the English speaking provinces, leading to the foundation of the various political movements including the SCNC and SCYL in the early 1990s. Government response to pro-secessionist political movements and those demanding greater regional autonomy has increasingly toughened.

In the context of the 1997 elections hundreds of political opponents were arrested and tortured and many of them died. In 1999 a group of English-speaking detainees was convicted to long prison terms in an unfair trial. On 31 December 1999 a declaration of independence of the Southern Cameroons was broadcast over regional radio in the southwest of the country. Several members of the self-declared political leadership of the Southern Cameroons were subsequently arrested and held incommunicado for several months. They were released without trial 14 months later

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