

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers and the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

Ref.: AL CMR 2/2026

(Please use this reference in your reply)

3 June 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers and Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 59/4, 61/22, 53/12 and 59/5.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning **a pattern of institutionalized restrictions and criminalization aimed at preventing Ms. Maximilienne Ngo Mbe from exercising her legitimate human rights activities.**

Special Procedures mandate holders have previously raised concerns with Your Excellency's Government regarding alleged instances of intimidation and harassment against Ms. Ngo Mbe and her organization REDHAC, for instance in [CMR 1/2011](#), CMR 3/2013, [CMR 1/2015](#) and [CMR 1/2020](#). We regret that to date, no response to these communications has been received. In turn, we thank Your Excellency's Government for its reply to [CMR 5/2017](#), which also sought to address concerns in relation to Ms. Ngo Mbe, received on 11 July 2018.

Woman human rights defender Maximilienne Ngo Mbe is the Executive Director and Co-Chair of the Board of Directors of the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC). She has allegedly been the target of threats and smear campaigns, particularly due to REDHAC's work in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon and her advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gender-diverse (LGBT) persons. She is on trial for "breaking seals, rebellion, and related charges," primarily based on her legitimate and lawful resistance to the restrictions imposed on REDHAC by the authorities in Cameroon.

According to the information received:

Ms. Ngo Mbe's trial commenced on 6 April 2025 and has been marked by several adjournments, leading to a prolonged judicial process and frequent court summonses.

At the hearing on 2 March 2026, the prosecution and defence rested their case after presenting all their evidence. The defence allegedly highlighted numerous irregularities documented since the beginning of the trial, including that the process had been prolonged repeatedly, and requested the Court to acquit

Ms. Ngo Mbe. The Court then adjourned for the specific purpose of deliberation and delivery of judgment. However, the 16 March hearing, at which the judge was originally scheduled to deliver the verdict, was unexpectedly postponed once again.

On 6 April 2026, the Douala-Bonanjo Tribunal of First Instance presided over the eighth hearing in the case. Ms. Ngo Mbe was absent from this hearing due to medical reasons. In her absence, the Sub-Prefect of Douala 1, representing the Prefect of the Wouri Department and the State of Cameroon, requested that the case be reopened in order to present additional testimony. The prosecution allegedly argued that the Court should set aside its deliberation and reopen the case, as the plaintiff may have additional relevant information. In a development that appears to contravene the fundamental principles of legal certainty and procedural finality, the presiding judge granted the motion to re-open the case, referencing 'a desire to seek the truth' and allowing the State to submit sixty new documents as well as to enter a State representative as a new key witnesses. This is despite the defense arguing that the plaintiff had never appeared during seven previous hearings, and alleging that the request was part of a deliberate prolongation of judicial proceedings.

Nevertheless, another hearing was scheduled for 4 May 2026, during which the trial was again adjourned. At the time of drafting, it is set to resume on 1 June 2026, with continued witness examination and further proceedings.

This sequence of events suggests a deliberate strategy of prolongation, intended to maintain Ms. Ngo Mbe in a state of permanent legal insecurity and to obstruct her work advocating for LGBT persons.

The harassment of Ms. Ngo Mbe is not an isolated judicial event, but appears to be part of a documented trajectory of violence and intimidation. In 2015, she was allegedly targeted by smear campaigns related to her work with LGBT persons and in 2018 was reportedly placed under surveillance. In 2019, Ms. Ngo Mbe was furthermore subjected to a violent assault at gunpoint by unidentified perpetrators.

The targeting of Ms. Ngo Mbe alongside other individuals associated with REDHAC points to a strategic effort to decapitate the leadership of one of the most effective human rights networks in Central Africa.

Without wishing to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, we wish to express our deep concern over the apparent procedural irregularities and alleged criminalization of the legitimate human rights defense work of Ms. Ngo Mbe. We wish to recall to Your Excellency's Government the international legal framework relevant in this case, namely the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which the Republic of Cameroon is a State Party since 27 June 1984, as well as the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. These instruments establish clear, non-negotiable obligations that ensure the protection of individuals against the arbitrary use of State power, particularly through the manipulation of legal and administrative processes often characterized as "lawfare".

The right to a fair trial, as enshrined in article 14 of the ICCPR, is a complex guarantee that applies to both criminal and civil proceedings to ensure the proper administration of justice. At the core of this right is the principle of equality of arms, which dictates that all parties in a legal proceeding must be provided with the same procedural rights. This principle is violated when one party is put at a significant disadvantage in presenting its case. In the context of the 6 April 2026 hearing, the decision to reopen the case after both the prosecution and the defense had already rested their arguments on 2 March 2026 constitutes a profound breach of this standard. The Human Rights Committee has emphasized that equality between parties requires that each side be given the opportunity to contest all arguments and evidence adduced by the other. We are concerned that allowing the State to introduce sixty new documents and a new witness at the stage of deliberation—especially after failing to appear for seven consecutive hearings—subverts this balance and creates a "trial by exhaustion" that prejudices the defendant.

We are furthermore concerned that the constant delays to the trial undermine Ms. Ngo Mbe's human rights, exacerbate the judicial harassment she is experiencing, and limit the effective functioning of REDHAC: article 14(3)(c) of the ICCPR establishes the right to be tried without undue delay. This guarantee is intended to avoid keeping an accused person in a state of prolonged uncertainty regarding their fate. International jurisprudence assesses the "reasonableness" of a delay by looking at the complexity of the case, the conduct of the accused, and the behavior of the judicial authorities. In this instance, the trial has persisted since April 2025, a delay which does not appear to be justifiable by these metrics, considering the circumstances of the case. The repeated adjournments and the sudden reopening of the evidentiary phase serve to prolong the judicial process unnecessarily, which the Human Rights Committee identifies as a violation of the State's duty to organize its judiciary effectively. Such delays are particularly concerning when used against human rights defenders, as they function as a form of judicial harassment intended to chill their advocacy work.

The underlying charges against Ms. Ngo Mbe also allow for reference to be made to the right to freedom of association, as protected under article 22 of the ICCPR. Any restriction on this right must be prescribed by law, and be necessary in a democratic society to protect specific interests such as national security or public order (see article 22(2) ICCPR). The suspension of REDHAC in December 2024 by administrative decree, rather than through a transparent judicial process, raises serious questions in relation to the principle of legality: The basis for this sanction was namely Cameroon's 1990 Law on Associations, which requires NGOs to obtain prior provincial authorization and specific public-order justifications to carry out their activities. We are concerned that this legislation is being applied arbitrarily and does not satisfy the requirements set by international law to constitute a sufficiently clear legal basis for the criminalization of associations and/or their members, and particularly wish to recall that article 22(2) ICCPR prohibits the use of vague laws or administrative shortcuts for the purpose of bypassing the judiciary or violating constitutional rights. The criminalization of members of associations for accessing their workspace under the charge of "breach of seals", as in the case of Ms. Ngo Mbe, would then appear to constitute a continuation of this violation of international standards.

Additionally, the right to freedom of association inherently encompasses the functional autonomy of organizations to engage in activities that further their stated

objectives and to appoint the individuals necessary to advance those goals. Under international human rights law, this freedom is not merely a passive right but an active, "enabling right" that protects all internal operations and activities essential for an association's fulfillment. Consequently, any undue State interference with these operational actions, including arbitrary detention and prolonged judicial proceedings against members, are in direct violation of this right.

The alleged history of threats, surveillance, and physical assaults faced by Ms. Ngo Mbe since 2015 appear to indicate severe shortcomings of Your Excellency's Government in this regard. We are furthermore concerned that the "rebellion" charges against Ms. Ngo Mbe may constitute a form of reprisal for her documentation of torture cases and advocacy for marginalized groups.

Finally, the principle of the independence of the judiciary is a cornerstone of all fair trial guarantees. International standards, such as the Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Fair Trial and Legal Assistance in Africa, require that the judiciary be free from interference by other branches of government, such as the Ministry of Territorial Administration or local sub-prefects. We are deeply concerned about reports that the executive branch was allowed to disrupt the finality of a trial after deliberation had begun, which raises serious questions about equality of arms in this case.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide information on the specific provision(s) of the Cameroonian Criminal Procedure Code that would allow for the reopening of a case and the submission of additional evidence after the closing of arguments and beginning of deliberations, as occurred in the case of Ms. Ngo Mbe during the hearing on 2 March 2026.
3. Please provide information on the official seal report (procès-verbal de pose de scellés) that formed the basis for the "breach of seals" charge against Ms. Ngo Mbe. If no physical seals were placed by a judicial authority, please elaborate on the legal and factual basis for this charge.
4. Please elaborate on why State representatives failed to attend the first seven hearings of the trial, and what steps Your Excellency's Government plans to take in order to ensure that their delayed decision to participate does not result in violations of fair trial guarantees as stipulated by article 14(3)(c) ICCPR.

5. Please provide information on the legal grounds based on which 60 new documents were deemed admissible during the 6 April 2026 hearing, and elaborate on what measures were taken to ensure the defense had "adequate time and facilities" to review this volume of new material.
6. Please describe how the December 2024 decree suspending REDHAC complies with the 1990 Law on Associations, which requires prior provincial authorization and specific public-order threats, and how the 1990 Law on Associations in turn is compatible with the right to freedom of association as stipulated by article 22 ICCPR.
7. In light of the alleged 2019 assault and consistent death threats, what concrete measures has the State of Cameroon taken to ensure the safety and physical integrity of woman human rights defender Ms. Maximilienne Ngo Mbe, as well as other individuals and organizations advocating for human rights, particularly with a view to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders?
8. Please provide detailed information on the measures Your Excellency's Government has adopted and/or plans to adopt in order to guarantee the freedom to defend human rights and the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association in Cameroon.

This communication, and any response received from your Excellency's Government, will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) at the 60 days mark. Should Your Excellency's Government respond within 60 days, both the communication and the response, may be published before the 60 days mark. The communications and responses will also be made available in the subsequent periodic report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Gina Romero

Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Andrea Bolaños Vargas

Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Margaret Satterthwaite
Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers

Graeme Reid
Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual
orientation and gender identity

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Cameroon is a State Party since 27 June 1984.

Article 22 ICCPR states that everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, and that no restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those which are prescribed by law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (*ordre public*), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. States in this sense not only have a negative obligation to abstain from unduly interfering with the rights of peaceful assembly and of association but also have a positive obligation to facilitate and protect these rights in accordance with international human rights standards (A/HRC/17/27, para. 66; and A/HRC/29/25/Add.1). This means ensuring that the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are enjoyed by everyone, without discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (see also ICCPR, art. 26) (A/HRC/41/41, para. 13).

We wish to highlight that States' obligations must be implemented in a nondiscriminatory manner, with particular attention to the rights and needs of individuals from groups or populations at higher risk of facing discrimination and marginalization, including women; youth; indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, persons belonging to minority groups or groups at risk, including those victims of discrimination because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, and non-nationals, as well as activists advocating for women's and sexual and reproductive rights and facing discrimination for their political views, including opposition to their government". (A/HRC/53/38/Add.4, para. 21).

The Human Rights Committee has clearly stated that any restrictions on these rights must meet the requirement of legality, and also be both necessary for and proportionate to at least one of the permissible grounds for restrictions (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 36). With regard to article 19(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Human Rights Committee has clarified that States are required to ensure that, when freedom of expression is restricted, the restrictions must have a legitimate objective that is both necessary and proportionate (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 35). The Committee has made similar clarifications regarding necessity and proportionality with respect to articles 21 and 22 of the Covenant. (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 36). Restrictions must aim to achieve a specific objective, not unduly intrude on other rights and must be the least intrusive means to a legitimate end. Any restriction must be compatible with the provisions, aims and objectives of the Covenant, including the prohibition on discrimination. Moral disapproval of same-sex conduct, even if widespread, is not a legitimate ground to restrict fundamental human rights (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 46).

We would also like to further refer to Human Rights Council resolution 22/6, which calls upon States to ensure that if “procedures governing the registration of civil society organizations exist, that these are transparent, accessible, non-discriminatory, expeditious and inexpensive, allow for the possibility to appeal and avoid requiring re-registration, in accordance with national legislation, and are in conformity with international human rights law” (A/HRC/RES/22/6, para. 8). The former Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has furthermore highlighted that where a registration license has been rejected, the organization “should have the opportunity to challenge the decision before an independent and impartial court” (A/HRC/20/27, para. 61).

In his report on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in relation to the human rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association (A/HRC/56/49), the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity explicitly calls on States to remove obstacles for the registration of organizations associated with sexual orientation and gender identity (A/HRC/56/49, par. 78(j)). He observes that States enact a variety of measures to prevent the registration of organizations working on sexual orientation and gender identity: “Many States refuse to register organizations that work on sexual orientation and gender identity-related issues, or establish unnecessary administrative obstacles that effectively prevent groups from registering. Sometimes the work of existing groups is suspended by authorities or subjected to official investigation for no reason other than the fact that it is work on sexual orientation and gender identity-related issues.” He draws attention to the deleterious impact of such policies, noting that “this has the effect of undermining the rights to freedom of assembly and association of those groups and organizations – setting the stage for a variety of penalties designed to unlawfully punish individuals and groups for their political opinions, identities, human rights advocacy and efforts to express divergent viewpoints.” (A/HRC/56/49, par. 44)

Additionally, we would like to bring articles 5(a) and 17 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to the attention of your Excellency’s Government. Article 5(a) establishes that “[f]or the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, at the national and international levels: To meet or assemble peacefully”. Article 17 provides that “[i]n the exercise of the rights and freedoms referred to in the present Declaration, everyone, acting individually and in association with others, shall be subject only to such limitations as are in accordance with applicable international obligations and are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society”.

The United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders further supplements these treaty-based rights, setting out the rights and responsibilities of States, human rights defenders and all actors in society in ensuring a safe and enabling environment for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Article 1 of the Declaration affirms the right of everyone, individually and in association with others, to promote and strive for the protection of

human rights. Article 2 provides that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Crucially, article 5 affirms that everyone has the right to form, join and participate in non-governmental organizations, associations or groups, and article 12 requires States to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, or arbitrary action as a consequence of their legitimate human rights work.

The former Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association furthermore recalled that all States governed by the rule of law have an obligation to eliminate obstacles that impair or restrict access to justice (A/HRC/47/24, para. 2). He further indicated that “[a]ccess to justice, the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the strengthening of civic space are inextricably linked” (A/HRC/47/24, para. 20) and highlighted that “barriers to access to justice should never be placed as deterrence measures undermining the essence of other rights” (A/HRC/47/24, para. 22).

He also highlighted that the rights to a fair trial “implies access to a pre-established, independent and impartial court, the decisions of which are based on law, following proceedings that observe procedural guarantees” (A/HRC/47/24, para. 43) and recalled the guarantees enumerated by the Human Rights Committee, which are: “equality before the courts; the right to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law; procedural guarantees; the right to compensation in cases of a miscarriage of justice in criminal cases; and the right not to be tried or punished again for an offence that has already been tried (*ne bis in idem*)” (CCPR/C/GC/32, paras. 54–57, A/HRC/47/24, para. 43).