



MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATION

MINISTÈRE DE LA COMMUNICATION

GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

**MEDIA DRIFTS, SYSTEMATIC MISINFORMATION AND
LYNCHING OF NATIONAL AND FOREIGN PERSONALITIES IN
THE PUBLIC SPACE**

JOINT PRESS CONFERENCE

MINCOM - MINPOSTEL

STATEMENT OF

H.E. RENE EMMANUEL SADI

MINISTER OF COMMUNICATION

YAOUNDE, JULY 13, 2020

Madam Minister of Posts and Telecommunications;

Mr President of the National Communication Council;

Mr Director General of the National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies, ANTIC;

Distinguished Journalists and Managers of Media Outlets;

Distinguished Media Practitioners;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

I would like to thank you for having so swiftly responded to my invitation to take part in this press conference which I will be jointly granting with Madam the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications.

Madam Minister, I wish you a warm welcome here at the Ministry of Communication.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Government communication will focus on the increasingly recurrent media drifts within the national public space, and mostly, on the observation of a propensity for systematic misinformation, carried out by certain traditional media and through social media.

As a matter of fact, this Government communication was made necessary as a result of certain recent current events marked by a dizzyingly high propagation of untruths, more apparent and inappropriate, with the very often aim to castigate the action of public authorities and to blacken the reputation of leading Cameroonian and foreign figures.

It should be noted that these untruths and other information generally fabricated or deliberately biased, are likely to undermine social cohesion and the living together of populations.

We note to deplore and denounce it that these misinformation actions are mostly related to the most worrying and sensitive issues of the moment.

I would like, without going into excessive details, to mention among other issues, the case of the coronavirus pandemic, which our country, like all other countries around the world, has been facing for the past five months.

In this regard, many denigrators and other self-invested sermonizers have, under various profiles, scoured all kinds of media, to challenge and vilify the National Response Strategy against this pandemic, implemented under the auspices of the Prime Minister, Head of Government, and under the esteemed leadership of the HEAD OF STATE, HIS EXCELLENCY PAUL BIYA.

Some of these misguided minds have thus attempted to question the statistics published by the Ministry of Public Health on the state of the pandemic, challenge the preventive measures prescribed by the Government and recommended by the World Health Organization, severely criticized the softening measures taken by the Government in order to account for economic imperatives, disputed without any valid argument the treatment protocol adopted by health authorities, questioned the skills of health personnel or organized real media crusades against the decision of the HEAD OF STATE to resume classes and ensure the organization of exams in primary, secondary and higher education.

However, today, that is to say five months after the start of the implementation of Cameroon's response to the coronavirus

pandemic, we can pride on the effectiveness of our response strategy, mostly for the practice of massive testing within communities and the decentralization of the management of reported cases, the results of the therapy used in relation to the number of people healed, the encouraging data recorded in terms of prevention and sustained efforts towards greater awareness of the dangerous nature of the pandemic and the need for all to get involved if we want to curb it.

This manipulative and distorting frenzy is even more accentuated in the media treatment of the security situation in the North-West and South-West Regions.

In this regard, some have deliberately chosen to misrepresent the facts, depending on the circumstances in which these occur, and for hidden purposes.

Thus, systematically, unrepentant and totally dehumanized armed gangs, assassins, looters and rapists are presented by certain media players as innocent angels, alleged victims of the tyranny of the Government and of our Defence and Security Forces.

In the same way, the numerous atrocities committed by the armed bands in these regions are concealed, while the Cameroonian Army which is legitimately engaged in a fight for the preservation of our territorial integrity and the security of goods and people, is constantly being conspired, demonized and stigmatized.

Furthermore, at a time when the HEAD OF STATE, building on his high sense of foresight, began in a methodical, determined and resolute manner, to bring solutions to the various recommendations of the Major National Dialogue with a view to a return to normal life in the North-West and South-West regions, certain media players

have constantly disseminated and published false allegations harmful to societal cohesion.

At a time when the HEAD OF STATE has, to the satisfaction of the entire national and international community, organized a Major National Dialogue with a view to an irreversible return to normal life in the crisis-hit regions, and the recommendations of this historic forum are taking gradually taking shape through concrete acts, some media players, who have made it a habit, are constantly relativizing, and even denying these positive developments by fanning the flames of fire time and time again with false allegations which are highly harmful to the stability of the nation.

The Government through my voice avails itself of this occasion to affirm, once again, that the offer of peace extended by the HEAD OF STATE, HIS EXCELLENCY PAUL BIYA, to the secessionist rebel and armed groups in the North-West and South-West Regions, to put an end to the hostilities which they continue to maintain, is more than ever actual.

As proof of this, the latest constantly evolving statistics, provided by the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NDDRC) Committee, which show 164 ex-secessionists who chose to go to the NDDRC North-West regional centre in Bamenda, 130 to the NDDRC South-West regional centre in Buea, to which we should add 186 ex-Boko Haram fighters including 44 on the same day last week, at the Meri transit centre in the Far-North region, making a total of 483 surrenders since the start of this operation.

From all indications, other such surrenders will continue in the days ahead

It should be indicated that these repentants, be they ex-Boko-Haram combatants or those who have laid down their arms in the North-West and South-West Regions, receive upon their arrival in the various host centres, medical care and appropriate psychosocial support for their de-radicalization and moral rearmament.

They also receive training in income-generating activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry, driving, computer skills, hairdressing, manicure, masonry, to name just a few.

This is a process, whose outcome is the integration of those concerned back into normal life, in the short term and on a case-by-case basis.

In addition, during their stay in the centres, measures are taken to shelter them as much as possible, away from COVID-19.

From the foregoing, we are well aware that, contrary to the allegations made by certain circles and relayed by a fringe of media players, the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee ... NDDRC, are neither disguised prisons, nor masked traps, made to attract members of armed groups, let alone a branch of the Army where these ex-combatants would be subjected to all kinds of abuses.

These centres are, on the contrary, places to host our young compatriots who were once lost, but who, having become aware of the need to turn their back from perdition, have chosen to come-back to the path of wisdom within the republican community, by accepting the offer of peace and forgiveness made by the HEAD OF STATE, HIS EXCELLENCY PAUL BIYA.

Faced with this misinformation campaign which spares no one, nor any sector of national life, the Government calls for caution, discernment and vigilance of the entire national community, so as not to be caught in the macabre game of those who, behind the scenes, are the masterminders of this heinous deception.

This vigilance is all the more imperative as, visibly, the privileged targets of this destruction enterprise include the Rule of Law, the Institutions of the Republic and those who embody them, with the aim to jeopardize the peace and stability of Cameroon.

In this context, some clarifications may be necessary, especially considering press freedom and the use of social media.

With regard to press freedom which the Cameroonian citizen fully enjoys today, I want to point out that nowhere in the world has press freedom been equated with libertinism or pretext for disorder, cacophony or anarchy. This means that the vocation of press freedom, which is one of the fundamental pillars of democracy and the Rule of Law, cannot be used to build areas of lawlessness and disintegration of the social fabric.

It has always been so throughout the world, since the emergence of freedom societies, of which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 marks the impulse by stipulating, in its article 11 that “the free communication of thought, and of opinion, is one of the most precious rights of man. Every citizen, therefore, may freely speak, write, and publish his sentiments, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law...”

Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted in New York on 16 December 1966 stipulates in Article 19,

paragraph 2 that "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice." The same instrument goes further to specify in paragraph 3 of the same article that the exercise of these freedoms "carries with it special duties and responsibilities. Consequently, they may be subject to certain restrictions which shall, however, be such as are provided by law and are necessary for respect of the rights and reputations of others and for the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals."

In this light, press freedom, which is a public freedom, in as much as it is exercised in the public space and puts the different individual freedoms in competition and in a situation of reciprocal preservation, can only exist if it takes into account its consequential imperatives, which are social responsibility, respect for societal values and respect for the Rule of law as an expression of the general and impersonal will.

In other words, if there is no democracy without press freedom, there is also no press freedom without social responsibility, without preservation of the freedoms of others, without respect for societal values and compliance with applicable law.

In Cameroon, press freedom is guaranteed and organized by the Law of 19 December 1990 on social communication, amended and supplemented by the Law of 4 January 1996 repealing administrative censorship of press organs.

This entire body of laws enshrines a genuine field of freedoms for the expression of ideas and opinions through all media operating in one way or another on the national territory. The legal environment thus created, by the will of the Head of State, establishes a system

of freedoms which in turn requires that each media actor and, in general, all those who choose to express themselves in the public arena through the media, must not only comply with the professional rules of ethics governing the exercise of this profession, but also bow to the primacy of the fundamental values that prevail within the Republic.

Moreover, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that, for a country as young as ours, progress towards a society of freedoms has been following an upward trend, with a particularly remarkable rate of acceleration.

As far as the media sector is concerned, to take just this example, creating a simple newspaper for a person other than the State was, 30 years back, a hard nut to crack; and such an undertaking was even more difficult, if not impossible, in the case of radio or television.

In terms of content, a simple critical remark directed against a public institution or official could lead to all kinds of trouble for the author or their employer, which could go as far as deprivation of liberty or cessation of activity, depending on the nature of the case.

You will agree with me that all this is a distant memory today.

The results of the reforms undertaken in this sector since the end of the 1990s need no further explanation.

To date, there are about 600 print media outlets registered with the competent authorities, including more than ten daily newspapers. There are over 200 radio broadcast stations of all categories (commercial, denominational, thematic, community radio stations, etc.), some 30 television channels, 200 cable distribution operators, not to mention the many online media.

Having made this observation, it is now up to the media professionals, henceforth equipped with these tools of freedom, to

ensure that these are harnessed to the best for the entire Cameroonian society and for the image of Cameroon that is perceived by the foreign world.

To do so, they must always bear in mind that they hold in their hands strategic instruments for the life of the nation. That is why we constantly appeal to their professionalism, responsibility and citizenship in the exercise of their profession.

The reason is that the misuse of this freedom can, against all odds, become perilous for the equilibrium of the nation.

If badly exploited, abused and thwarted, as we have been so desperate to see in our country in recent times, the use of this freedom can just as easily deconstruct or even destroy.

It is therefore not an instrument to be trifled with, but one that should be understood to the full extent of its sensitive and strategic nature.

Our press must therefore look in the mirror if it does not want to run the risk of missing out on the challenge of building the stable and prosperous Cameroon that it itself so badly needs, at least as much as the entire Cameroonian people.

On the subject of the pernicious use of social media that have become veritable deviant and bewildering catch-alls, we must unfortunately face the fact that they have been regrettably diverted from the objectives originally assigned to them.

In the context of the media trend that we have just described in relation to traditional media, social media are even more distinguished by their preponderant inclination to disseminate and share Fake News, personal attacks and other open vendettas, infringements of privacy, failure to respect the secrecy of correspondence, whether public or private, unjustified unwarranted

attacks on the lives of others and, in general, violation of the basic rules necessary for a healthy and tolerant social life.

Such a shift places the use of social media at odds with their primary mission, that of a community dialogue as constructive as edifying, allowing virtual social interactions without geographical limits, thanks to the virtues of digital technologies, even in situations of mobility.

Social media were therefore not created to destroy the order and values of the world, but rather to build, strengthen and use them for the development of humankind and society.

Yet it is the opposite that we see in the Cameroonian context today, where the appropriation of social networks by many actors out of nowhere, blithely turning into improvised journalists, transforms these genuine communication spaces into veritable grabbing fairs, where only the distortion of facts, the mutations of vices into false values, hate speech, personal attacks, false allegations and ungrounded assertions are the rule.

This whole of this is, as can easily be seen, likely to lead to the destruction of community values and the implosion of collapse of ferments.

Here again, the Government of the Republic denounces this trend that is harmful to the construction of the social model to which all Cameroonians are entitled to aspire, but which over the days and in a pernicious manner, is taking root in the media customs of our country.

The Government therefore calls on everyone to become aware of the need to refocus on the initial ideals of these formidable communication tools, which have been made accessible to all and democratized thanks to the expansion of the Internet, and strongly condemns the growing deviations in the use of these networks.

In any case, journalism, true and good journalism, must remain noble par excellence.

The journalist is neither an adventurer, nor a hired gunman, nor a factotum serving shameful and harmful ideologies.

Journalists must remain historians of the present, whose only raw material is the factual nature of their treatment of current events and the situations that surround them, always with a scrupulous consideration of the imperatives on which society is based and the values that structure their community.

To those media professionals who have chosen to identify with this noble idea of journalism, the Government has been supporting and will continue to support them in the exercise of their profession.

To others who, out of ignorance or naivety, still allow themselves to get sucked by the torments of professional denial, the Government launches an urgent appeal for a burst of responsibility and refocusing on the vocation of this profession and its universal canons.

In any case, all of them must know that it is up to them and to them first, to rewrite the letters of nobility of their profession and to put all their energies into making them once again what they should never have ceased to be, namely, a compass of the aspirations and the fulfilment of peoples.

In other words, for the sake of the kind of journalism that we earnestly desire, we need to see things as they are, not as we think they are, or as we want them to be.

Thank you for your kind attention.

THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATION

(Signed) René Emmanuel SADI