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REPUBLIQUE DU CAMEROUN

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MINISTERE DES AFFAIRES
SOCIALES

Commemoration of the 31st edition of the Day of the African Child in Cameroon

African Theme: *“30 years after the adoption of the Charter: accelerate the implementation of Agenda 2040 for an Africa fit for children”*

National Theme: *“Protect every child from violence, exploitation, neglect and abuse: a priority for the Cameroonian Government”*

Speech by **Mrs Pauline Irène NGUENE, Minister of Social Affairs**, at the opening ceremony of the advocacy meeting with Members of Parliament to strengthen the legal and institutional framework for the protection of children against violence in Cameroon

Yaounde Conference Centre, June 16, 2021

- **Honourable President of the National Assembly;**
- **Dear Members of the Government,**
- **Dear Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Representatives of International Organizations,**
- **Honourable members of the National Assembly;**
- **Dear Representatives of Civil Society Organisations,**
- **Distinguished guests;**
- **Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is a great honour and a pleasant duty for me to take the floor before this august assembly on the occasion of this advocacy meeting to mark the commemoration of the 31st edition of the Day of the African Child in Cameroon.

Let me, first of all, sincerely express my gratitude to the **Right Honourable Speaker of the National Assembly**, for his approval for the holding of the meeting that brings us together today. This gratitude is extended to the Honourable Members of the National Assembly for their support and the efforts made to ensure the holding of this meeting which aims at raising awareness of the elected representatives on the need to strengthen the legal and institutional framework for the protection of children against all forms of violence.

I would also like to express our deep gratitude to the Prime Minister, Head of Government, and to all the members of the Government who have contributed to this meeting.

Finally, I would like to thank the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Plan International Cameroon and other development partners for their multi-faceted support in the search for appropriate solutions to the issues faced by socially vulnerable persons in general, and children in particular.

- **Distinguished guests,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen**

On this June 16, 2021, Cameroon joins the international community in commemorating the 31st edition of the Day of the African Child.

We should remember that this day was instituted through resolution **CMRes-1290** of July 18, 1990, of the Assembly of Heads of State and Governments of the Organisation of African Unity, now known as the African Union, in memory of the massacre of children in Soweto in South Africa in 1976 by the apartheid regime then in power in that country.

Therefore, commemorating a children's day is not only a tribute to children for their courageous actions to defend their rights, but also a call for introspection and commitment to the many challenges faced by children across the continent.

The theme chosen by the African Union for the commemoration of this edition of the Day of the African Child is: *“30 years after the adoption of the Charter: accelerate the implementation of Agenda 2040 for an Africa fit for children”*. This theme sufficiently reflects the will of African leaders to have, by 2040, a human capital capable of ensuring the relay of future generations, and calls on States Parties to take necessary and urgent measures at national level to ensure compliance with the rights of the Child.

However, the 2040 Agenda is based on ten aspirations which constitute the main challenges of the Continent for an **Africa fit for Children**. Therefore, in Cameroon, we have chosen to articulate the events of this 31st edition around aspiration No.7 which aims at protecting children against violence. Hence the choice of a national theme as follows: *“Protect every child from violence, exploitation, neglect and abuse: a priority for the Cameroonian Government”*.

- **Honourable Parliamentarians,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen.**

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), **youth violence** is a violence by and against young people and often affecting other young people. It can be psychological and verbal (harassment), physical and sexual (fights, sexual harassment, assaults, even murder or homicide).

According to the African Union Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, violence against children can take many forms and can occur in the private sphere, at school, within communities or at home. It can take the form of corporal punishment, forced labour and harmful labour practices, trafficking for forced labour, traditional practices of female genital mutilation, child marriages, virginity tests, breast ironing, killings of so-called witch children, sexual violence and exploitation, etc.

According to the results of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted in 2014, the percentage of children aged 1-4 years who experienced psychological aggression or corporal punishment in the month preceding the survey was 85%. The same source revealed that throughout their lifetime, an average of 80% of children have experienced psychological aggression and 45% severe corporal punishment (slaps or blows to the face, head or ears have been hit repeatedly). Furthermore, 47% of children aged 5-17 work, 11.4% of girls have been married before the age of 15, and 36% before the age of 18.

In addition, and to deplore it, one can note, the resurgence of violent situations in schools, unfortunately in the sight of younger pupils and teaching staff who are totally powerless or even spectators of these acts of violence. **The President of the Republic, His Excellency Paul BIYA**, in his address to the youth on February 10, 2020, underlined this concern in these terms: “: ***I cannot conclude without mentioning a recent incident that has shocked our consciences: the murder, in Yaounde, of a young mathematics teacher by one of his students. This incredible act speaks volumes about the excesses of our modern societies. I call on parents, the clergy and teachers to prevent, through their teachings, such acts from happening again. I also urge you to reflect on what has happened, to ponder its gravity and to resolve to never again commit such acts***”.

- **Distinguished guests,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen**

In this situation, it should be acknowledged that the Government of the Republic, with the support of its partners, is working tirelessly to combat violence against children, regardless of the setting or form.

In recent years, this determination has been reflected through the ratification of almost all the international legal instruments for the protection of children including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols, as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. At the local level, the Constitution, the Civil Code, the Labour Code, the Penal Code, as well as numerous specific texts contain relevant provisions that protect children in general, and against various forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect in particular.

In addition to this legal arsenal, the institutional framework has been strengthened through, on the one hand, the organization of the Government, which nearly has thirteen ministerial departments whose missions contribute directly or indirectly to child protection, and, on the other hand, the organic text of the Ministry of Social Affairs, which assigns to this ministerial department, among other missions, the development, implementation and monitoring of child protection policies and programmes, in liaison with the administrations concerned.

In addition, at the strategic level, Cameroon has a National Child Protection Policy Paper and an Early Childhood Development Policy Paper, supported by multi-sectoral action plans. As concerns the fight against violence against children itself, we have, among other things, drawn up a Handbook of Operational Procedures for prevention, care and reintegration of victims, reinforced by a Code of Conduct for actors and stakeholders.

➤ **Honourable President of the National Assembly;**

➤ **Honourable Parliamentarians,**

If we can be pleased with this system of protection and promotion of the rights of the Child, why is it that situations of violence against children continue to exist, or more seriously, are only exacerbated?

Better still, how can we explain that despite the ratification of international texts for the protection of children and the adoption of an internal legal framework, many children are still victims of violence, as it can be seen through

- Their massive presence in the streets, to do odd jobs or to stay there permanently;
- The persistence of physical violence at home, at school and in the various environments where children live;
- The persistence of child marriages and traditional practices harmful to the full development of children;
- The failure to register children at birth and to send them to school;
- The regular reporting of cases of sexual abuse of children, in places that were supposed to guarantee their safety;
- Etc

Moreover, the most surprising thing about these situations of violence against children is that they often emanate from their parents, or that they take place with their complicity:

- How can we understand the indifference of these families whose children have found refuge in the street?
- How can we understand that parents accept what is called "amicable arrangements" with the sexual abusers of their children?
- How can we understand that under the false pretext of socialisation, parents deny their children the right to education and send them to work in farms or in the street?
- How can we explain the persistence of the law of Omerta, which says that *dirty laundry should not be washed in public* and which silences many family members in the face of the violence suffered by their children?

➤ **Honourable President of the National Assembly;**

It is in order to try to reverse the trend of this situation that we have requested and obtained the meeting of today from you.

In doing so, we are aware that in the space of a few hours, radical changes will not take place in the family and social field in terms of protecting children against violence. But we do believe, and we remain convinced, that in the face of this global threat of violence against children, the elected representatives, can play a decisive role, not only by taking ownership of this issue and making it their own, but also and above all by using their power to strengthen the legal and institutional framework so that:

- **All forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children cease forever;**
- **Long live the African Child;**
- **Long live Cameroon and its Illustrious Leader, the President of the Republic, His Excellency Paul BIYA.**

Thank you for your kind attention