

HEAD OF STATE'S NEW YEAR MESSAGE TO THE NATION

Yaounde, 31 December 2020

Fellow Cameroonians,

My dear compatriots,

I am convinced that you understand why I am beginning this traditional message by talking about the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic on our planet. In this regard, 2020 will undoubtedly be remembered as a dark year marked by hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide.

Like almost all countries, Cameroon was affected, perhaps less severely than other States. Despite our efforts, COVID-19 plunged many families into mourning and seriously hampered the functioning of our economy and society.

I take this opportunity to hail once more the dedication of our physicians, nurses and health personnel as a whole, thanks to whom many lives have been and continue to be saved.

It is perhaps too early to try to draw lessons from this painful episode which, moreover, is continuing. Needless to recall that this pandemic is not the first and history has it that epidemics wiped out entire populations, the most recent occurring in the wake of the First World War.

Should man take the blame because of his wanton exploitation of the planet's natural resources and his constant engagement in conflicts leading to massacres and diseases, as well as experiments to develop new weapons? I believe the question needs to be asked. Whatever the answer, our era should take credit for clearly posing the problem of the relationship between man and his natural environment. This was, I believe, the objective of the Paris Conference on Global Warming, whose recommendations are still relevant today.

In any case, we should not rest on our laurels. I have personally observed that most of our fellow citizens no longer comply with the protective measures prescribed by the Government.

At a time when, everywhere else, there is a second wave of the epidemic, coupled with the appearance of a new and more contagious strain of the virus, I urge you once again to put on your face masks, to wash your hands regularly and to consult a physician or any other health personnel if you notice any symptoms. This is the only way to save lives and to curb the spread of the virus.

My dear compatriots,

Our focus on the health situation did not prevent us from devoting ourselves to other essential tasks related to the management of our country, namely:

- maintaining security and peace throughout our national territory;
- strengthening our democratic process; and
- pursuing our economic, social and cultural development programme.

In recent years, our country has been facing external threats, particularly on our eastern border and in the northern part of our country.

In the first case, the threat comes from highway robbers lured by easy prey, namely peaceful stockbreeders and their herds.

In the second, the threat now takes the form of isolated raids by Boko Haram or suicide bomb attempts by teenagers. The effective vigilance and action of our Defence and Security Forces have significantly reduced the activities of these criminals.

The situation is different in the North-West and South-West Regions where armed groups maintain an atmosphere of terror and insecurity. They attack isolated communities and educational institutions from time to time to discourage parents from sending their children to school. The list of atrocities and crimes committed by these groups is already long. One of the most heinous of them is that which took place in Kumba recently, resulting in the death of seven school children with several others injured.

This crime, which is a shock to the human conscience, will not go unpunished. All the perpetrators will be hunted down relentlessly and brought to justice. Already, public opinion, particularly in the two regions concerned, can realize, if that is not yet the case, that these so-called "secessionists" are actually nothing more than murderers, and what is more, murderers of innocent children. To say that the Kumba carnage caused widespread outrage is an understatement.

I would now like to appeal, once more, to the sense of responsibility of the friendly countries hosting the sponsors and of the organizations financing and running

the armed gangs in the North-West and South-West Regions, through various channels. All those who would be identified at the end of investigations as initiators or accomplices of these odious crimes will answer for their actions.

Yet our Government has continued to demonstrate its commitment to openness and dialogue by, for example, releasing many former secessionists and facilitating their reintegration into society.

Furthermore, after the Major National Dialogue, the Government fast-tracked the implementation of an ambitious decentralization policy which includes a special status for our North-West and South-West Regions, which takes into account their specificities and aspirations.

I once more urge the youths who have been enlisted in armed gangs to come out of the bush and sign up with the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) centres in order to return to a normal life, like their other young compatriots.

The prevailing insecurity in the North-West and South-West Regions has caused untold damage to our country. Our democracy allows for the peaceful expression of all opinions, in compliance with the laws and regulations in force. Otherwise, peace and stability would be jeopardized.

I hail the patriotic spirit of those of our fellow citizens in the North-West and South-West Regions who are not only increasingly cooperating with the Defence and Security Forces, but are also courageously fighting these armed gangs. They have realized that these gangs are not acting in the interest of the people.

I would also like to commend here the bravery of our Defence and Security Forces that have not failed in their duty to protect the integrity of the national territory, the people and property. They deserve the respect and consideration of everyone. I encourage them to keep it up and to remain a republican force that respects human rights.

It is equally regrettable that some of our compatriots, who rallied around a personality who failed to achieve his ambitions during the last presidential election, took advantage of security and health difficulties to try to stir up a revolt falsely referred to as "peaceful marches". Fortunately, very few people took part in these marches, thanks to the maturity of Cameroonians.

Needless to recall that in a democracy, access to political office is secured through the ballot box and not through the street, certain media organs or social media networks.

This is precisely the case in Cameroon where the democratic process is being conducted in accordance with the provisions of our Constitution and the rules laid down by our laws, as amply illustrated by the following recent happenings:

- In March 2018, the term of office of Senators was renewed.
- In October 2018, the Head of State was elected with an overwhelming majority.
- In February 2020, legislative elections were held, with the Government securing a comfortable majority in the National Assembly.

- On the same date, municipal elections put an end to the system of government delegates in major towns, which are now managed by elected mayors.
- In December 2020, regional elections completed the implementation of the provisions of the decentralization process.

Thus, with each passing day, our political will to implement the democratic agenda that is in line with the genuine aspirations of the Cameroonian people is further strengthened, an agenda initiated upon my accession to the helm of State and which led, a few years later, to the institution of the multiparty system.

To those who are criticizing the imperfections of our democracy, I would like to say that it took us just a few decades to put it in place. The major democratic countries, for their part, did so only after several centuries marked by revolutions, civil wars and even episodes of dictatorship.

For my part, I am well aware of all that is still to be done. I am, however, convinced that we are on the right track and that soon we will all be proud of our democratic progress.

My dear compatriots,

It must be acknowledged that the international context - in particular the coronavirus pandemic and the decline in global growth - took a toll on the performance of our public finance and our economy during the year that is drawing to an end.

While maintaining our growth targets, we had to take fiscal consolidation and economic support measures

in order to weather these difficult times and enable the implementation of a recovery policy in 2021.

Thus, a decision was taken to finalize African Nations Championship (CHAN) 2021 and Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) 2022 projects, and to continue to implement plans for the reconstruction and development of the North-West, South-West and Far-North Regions.

Despite these efforts, it is expected that our growth rate, which had stabilized at around 4% in recent years, will witness a sharp decline in 2020 and that inflation will inch up. This is undoubtedly due to the impact of the global economic downturn and our domestic economic trends, especially the increase in security spending.

Nonetheless, Cameroon's economy has maintained a certain capacity to rebound despite the difficulties. Thanks to support from our international partners and, in the event of a decline in the pandemic, there is reason to hope for recovery in the coming months.

In the same vein, I would now like to draw your attention to the recent launch of our National Development Strategy (NDS) which replaces the Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (GESP) that has come to an end.

The National Development Strategy defines the main thrusts of our planning up to 2030. The document draws lessons from past experiences and sets new goals for the next decade, notably the structural transformation of our economy and inclusive development.

It will therefore be necessary to step up the fight against poverty, unemployment and the lingering informal sector. It will also be necessary to strive to achieve an 8% growth rate by embarking on the

structural transformation of our economy and enhancing the effectiveness of public spending. In so doing, we will put all the odds of achieving emergence by 2035 on our side.

Naturally, we will also continue to implement our social development policy which was defined at the start of the current seven-year term concerning youth employment, education, health and family.

These, my dear compatriots, are the outlines of the action that the Government has, despite the difficulties, strove to implement in recent months and that it will continue to implement in the coming years, which will be crucial for our progress towards emergence.

I am convinced that we will be able to achieve our objectives, provided that we agree to make the required efforts and to embark on the needed reforms.

Fellow Cameroonians,

My dear compatriots,

The year that is ending has not been an easy one. We had to meet many major challenges. We must remain united and determined, like in the past. The Cameroonian people have always risen to the challenges facing them. We should be proud of this.

Happy and Prosperous New Year to you all.

Long live the Republic!
Long live Cameroon!