

**31 December 2007 at Unity Palace**

## **HEAD OF STATE'S NEW YEAR MESSAGE TO THE NATION**

**Fellow Cameroonians,**

**My Dear Compatriots,**

Before making an overview of the events of the year just ended with you, I believe it is absolutely necessary to come back to the tragedy that occurred in Bakassi a few weeks ago and which left 21 of our soldiers dead and many others injured. I shared the strong feelings of all Cameroonians and, like you all, felt the deepest sympathies for the families of the victims. However, one cannot but also feel indignation at this attack on our soldiers by unidentified elements.

We must get to the bottom of what transpired at Bakassi. The Nigerian authorities have assured us that they had no responsibility in this tragedy. They dispatched a Senior Minister to Yaounde to extend their condolences to us and to express their attachment to the Greentree Agreement on the implementation of the ruling of the International Court of Justice concerning Bakassi.

Investigations are under way on the Nigerian side and on the Cameroonian side. I want to believe that they will reveal the truth about these hideous acts whose perpetrators must be brought to book. In the meantime, precautions have been taken to ensure that this tragedy does not repeat itself. The nation can count on its army.

**My Dear Compatriots,**

The year 2007 was, in a way, a transitional year, falling between a period of rehabilitation of our public finances and consolidation of our institutions and a period which, we all hope, will be one of a strong revival of economic growth and the improvement of the living conditions of our people.

This definitely does not mean that nothing has been done over the last twelve months. You have all been witnesses.

The management of the State budget has improved considerably. This has been recognized by the international financial institutions.

This progress as well as the funds freed up by debt cancellations have enabled us to invest in the social sectors.

The education sector has been one of its beneficiaries. Hundreds of new schools have been opened. New faculties have been created in our universities. Many new teachers have been recruited at all levels.

The health sector has not been left out. The country's health coverage has expanded. The fight against malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS has been pursued and there has been no slowdown in the provision of drugs to government hospitals and health centres.

Furthermore, special efforts have been made to rehabilitate our defective infrastructure or create new ones, notably in the road and urban sanitation sectors.

Measures have also been taken to defend our purchasing power. As such, salary advances were granted to State employees and measures were adopted to combat price hikes, either by fighting speculation or removing taxes on some essential goods, or even by liberalizing the importation of some goods.

Regarding insecurity, the forces of law and order were provided with additional resources and have put in place dissuasive mechanisms.

The results of these different actions on the ground have been noted by each and every one of you. I am the first to acknowledge that they do not resolve all the problems, but they show anyway our determination to pursue our efforts to improve the day-to-day lives of Cameroonians and ensure their chances of a better future.

Furthermore, as you know, my main concern for nearly twenty years now has been to move our institutions towards a modern democracy that is adapted to the current state of our society and that meets international standards. In this regard, little by little, we are making progress.

Most recently, the National Assembly passed laws on decentralization which will enable Cameroonians to participate more directly in the management of public affairs. The decrees of implementation are ready and will soon be effective. I cannot overemphasize the importance of the upcoming changes. To complete the picture, what will remain to be done will be to put in place the Senate that will represent, at the national level, the regional and local authorities.

Lastly, the Constitutional Council will take its final shape.

The legislative and municipal elections of last July and September afforded us an opportunity to measure the progress made in our democratic process. Except for a few dysfunctions, polling was conducted in peace and transparency. The majority of observers have acknowledged it. The electors voted into the National Assembly and municipal councils, strong and homogeneous majorities. They will enable, at the national and council levels, the implementation of development policies that are in line with the general interest and local needs. Nevertheless, we will continue to improve our electoral system such as to avoid disputes and encourage a higher turnout.

Still concerning the functioning of our institutions, I cannot fail to mention a problem that was raised by journalists during my recent stay in Paris and which, I am aware, has been the subject of much speculation in Cameroon for several months now. I am referring to the possible revision of our Constitution and particularly Article 6, Paragraph 2, which provides that “the President of the Republic shall be elected for a term of office of seven years renewable once”.

Even though the next presidential election is only due in 2011, it is normal and even encouraging that Cameroonians take an interest in this issue since it concerns the future of their institutions. Many calls in favour of a revision are reaching me from all our provinces. I am obviously not indifferent to them.

In fact, there are arguments for a revision, particularly of Article 6 which indeed imposes a limitation of the people's will, a limitation which is out of tune with the very idea of democratic choice.

I want to add that in itself a constitutional revision is nothing unusual. Our present Constitution (which is itself the outcome of a revision of our Constitution of 1972) contains revision procedures which enable, if necessary, an adjustment of the text to changes in our political society. Moreover, the procedures are of a general nature and do not concern anybody in particular.

We are therefore going to reconsider, in this spirit, those provisions of our Constitution which would need to be harmonized with recent developments in our democratic system so as to meet the expectations of the vast majority of our population.

Naturally, this work will not divert us from the many tasks awaiting us in the months ahead.

Foremost among them is the revival of growth. I reiterated this during the last Council of Ministers Meeting. At the risk of repeating myself, I will say once again that growth is the key to most of our problems. According to statistics, it stood at 3.5% in 2006; it will probably reach 4.1% in 2007 and forecasts put it at 4.5% in 2008. This is not bad, but it is not sufficient to ensure the effective takeoff of our economy. That is why I instructed the government to speed up the launching of major agricultural and industrial projects that I have listed time and again. We can no longer wait for issues to go from workshops to seminars and from seminars to committees without any tangible results.

It is now time for action. Let us shake off inertia, remove obstacles, set objectives and schedules and keep to them.

Given that, in most cases, the national or foreign private sector partners with the State, we should lay with this sector the foundation for true partnership whereby each one plays its role: the State, that of facilitator and regulator, and enterprises that of investor and producer. It is by so doing that problems relating to taxation, prices, investments, energy, credits, etc. could be addressed and we will move from good intentions to concrete achievements.

At this point, I must mention an obstacle which we have not yet been able to overcome, namely energy supply, particularly, electricity. For many years, I have been underscoring the need for us to have an adequate supply of electricity to ensure our economic and, particularly, industrial development and to meet the growing demand of the population. Yet, our economy continues to suffer from the shortage of energy and Cameroonian households experience frequent and sometimes prolonged power cuts. These power cuts have recently exasperated populations in various localities. Although we cannot allow such acts to degenerate into public disorder, we can understand the discontent of our compatriots whose business activities, studies or living conditions in general are jeopardized. It is therefore necessary to seriously address this problem and to find solutions as soon as possible.

In a country that is endowed with a huge hydro-electric potential and exploitable gas deposits, it is difficult to understand why we suffer such a shortage. Yet, there are

dam and electric power station projects which have, for several years, been under negotiation. I therefore demand that action be taken, that decisions be made, that commitments be honoured and that, in case of failure, conclusions be drawn.

This leads me to the issue of renewable energy, notably bio-fuels and solar energy, in which it would be useful for us to take an interest.

I can see nothing but benefits if we examine the possibility of developing in Cameroon the production of bio-fuels from some residual agricultural products as has been successfully done, it seems, in some African countries. It would also be in our interest to envisage the exploitation of solar energy which is appropriate in most of our territory. In so doing, we will save on our oil resources, while contributing to the fight against global warming.

Experience shows that if we have the will, the necessary skills and, of course, financial resources, it will be possible to undertake major projects. The mining sector is an example. Be it bauxite, iron or cobalt, significant prospects are opening up for us, with predictable employment and State revenue spin-offs. And I want to point out that this could also lead to progress in the areas of energy and infrastructure.

### **My Dear Compatriots,**

Our second priority in the coming years will be to redouble our efforts in order to raise the living standard and improve the livelihood of our people.

Raising the living standard depends, obviously, on the revival of growth. I have indicated what should be done in this regard. However, I am aware that the impacts cannot be felt in the short term. I mentioned the initiatives already taken to improve the purchasing power of the people. We will continue on this path. In the coming months, we are going to see to what extent budget wedges can allow us to envisage the gradual raising of remuneration in the public service.

Furthermore, we will redouble our efforts to offer our youth the most suitable conditions of learning at all levels. The modernization and professionalization of our educational system are under way. I am convinced that in the medium term, they will have positive effects for youth employment.

Similarly, we will strive to enable our health system to meet the real needs of the people, by providing hospitals and health centres the necessary staff, equipment and drugs. For instance, I will instruct the Government to provide dialysis equipment and scanners to provincial hospitals which lack them, in order to relieve patients who are currently compelled to travel long distances under difficult conditions. In the long run, we should come up with a medical assistance mechanism whereby all Cameroonians will have access to healthcare, irrespective of their means.

Access to drinking water will be extended. There are major projects in the pipeline in this area with financing already secured for Douala and Yaounde. But other urban centres and rural areas will not be left out.

I have said what I thought about deficiencies in the electricity sector. I will not come back to that, but I will personally see to the resolution of this problem.

In urban areas, we will continue to pay special attention to the problems of housing and roads. In rural areas, our efforts will focus on roads and audiovisual coverage, in short, on all the means that contribute to opening up these areas, with a view to getting the populations out of their administrative, economic, health and cultural isolation.

I earlier mentioned what had already been done to roll back insecurity. We will not stop at that because even in a vast country like ours with porous boundaries, although it is an uphill task, it is unacceptable that ordinary people should live in fear for their lives and for their property. Proper collaboration between the population and the forces of law and order would probably improve matters.

I want to add that there is another form of insecurity which is undoubtedly as deadly as banditry. I am referring to that which, each year, leaves hundreds of dead and injured persons on our roads. We should be aware that this can happen to anyone. If our drivers could adopt responsible behaviour, what a lot of mishaps would be avoided! To force them to do so, instructions will be given to the appropriate authorities to ensure strict respect for the Highway Code.

Lastly, our society should banish the numerous manifestations of incivility, such as violence against women and children, lack of respect for the elderly, and brutality that characterizes all sorts of disputes with sometimes tragic consequences.

### **My Dear Compatriots,**

I have often talked about impediments to our progress, namely administrative inertia, shirking of responsibilities, personal interests, laxity, and so on. But, the most dreadful of these scourges, given its consequences and the difficulty in eradicating it, is undoubtedly corruption which jeopardizes our development and tarnishes the image of our country. Pursuing the fight against this scourge will be our third priority. And I can assure you it will not be limited to a few symbolic cases. We will continue to track it down wherever it is and mete out sanctions accordingly.

My Dear Compatriots,

Although it is not always obvious, Cameroon is making progress, Cameroon is changing. Like you, I wish that Cameroon would progress and change faster. That is what we are striving for. But, what I would like you to know is that I am still very determined to achieve this. And I am convinced that together we can make it.

### **My Dear Compatriots,**

Like every year during this season, it is now time for me to extend to each and every one of you my very sincere wishes for good health and happiness in the New Year.

**Happy and Prosperous New Year 2008!**  
**Long live Cameroon!**