

COMMUNIQUE: 16th Regional Meeting (Central Africa Region) of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly.

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Introduction

In keeping with article 17 of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement and article 6 of the Rules of Procedure of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA), the parliamentarians from the Central Africa Region of the ACP Group and their European counterparts met in Yaoundé (Cameroon), from 17 to 19 July 2018. They expressed their gratitude to the Government and the National Assembly of the Republic of Cameroon for the organisation of this meeting and the steps taken to ensure its success.

In their opening remarks, the co-presidents noted the progress made in the preparations for post-Cotonou negotiations and welcomed recent developments, which resulted in both parties adopting their negotiating mandates. The meeting reiterated the appeal for the preservation of the unity and solidarity of the ACP Group and the need to conduct negotiations in the context of a single undertaking. The meeting, while acknowledging the concept of regional peculiarities, held the view that these should help to strengthen the unity of the Group.

They also noted that regional organizations are the main actors in Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), which should serve as both catalysts for growth and mechanisms for the strengthening of good governance. They congratulated Cameroon, the only country in the region to have signed the (interim) EPA between the EU and the Central African community, while noting the role of EPAs in the strengthening of economic development cooperation and the integration of ACP countries into world trade.

The ensuing discussions focused on the following issues:

Regional Integration and Cooperation :

State of play of regional integration and cooperation: measures to strengthen regional integration and the implementation of the Customs Union

Members were informed of the progress made regarding regional integration in the Central Africa Region and expressed their concerns about the delay in the integration process and the weakness of trade flows between States and regions, the movement of persons, and the interconnection of physical infrastructures, which are still far away from the objectives set by the existing regional institutions.

Members highlighted the lack of progress in the matter despite the time that has elapsed. In addition, the success of this process depends on citizens' buy-in and this could be achieved through the active participation of parliamentarians. Members also expressed the hope that the issue regarding the single currency would be an integral component of regional integration, which should be addressed at the same time as the general concept of Free Trade Agreements.

Members welcomed the initiative for the unification of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the

Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC). They noted the efforts made and progress achieved by regional bodies towards the creation of a single community. They also underscored that regional integration was intended to harmonise trade policies, create a favourable environment for free circulation of goods and services, tackle capacity constraints, and effectively coordinate the initiatives taken by different organisations to stimulate trade. In addition, the region should be able to achieve these objectives by 2023.

Members declared that they supported the implementation of the Customs Union to strengthen regional integration. They also held the view that institutional and infrastructural frameworks, as well as the harmonisation of Customs laws and policies are essential in this regard. Members also reiterated that Member States must trust each other in order to facilitate relevant information for the completion of the integration process in Central Africa Region.

While acknowledging that regional integration has the potential to yield considerable economic benefits, Members underscored that it must be guided by a strategy formulation process that is inclusive of all stakeholders.

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

Members were informed of developments in the situation in the Gulf of Guinea. They took due note of the change in the modus operandi of the illegal groups operating in the zone and the creation of regional coordination centers, which has helped to significantly reduce the number of kidnappings. However, they are aware of the challenges of strengthening joint actions, the harmonisation of laws, and education and training needed to support the work of law enforcement officers, their knowledge of the marine environment, and the implementation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct.

Members called for the ratification of the Yaoundé Agreement by all the countries in the region as well as the mobilisation of resources to combat these illegal groups, which are well organized and use increasingly sophisticated methods as well as cutting-edge technology.

Members issued an appeal for regional and global cooperation in all fora to support shared initiatives to attack piracy at its source.

Finally, members expressed the need for government policies to seek to mobilise financial resources to help combat piracy.

Peace and Security challenges in the region

Building peace in a context of extremism

Members highlighted that extreme poverty, the lack of opportunities for young people, and inequality are the root causes of violent extremism. They also stressed that some emerging crimes such as kidnapping and the taking of hostages are opportunistic; terrorists also take advantage of the instability and anarchy in some parts of the region. Violent extremism, as well as cross-border insecurity are aggravated by the illegal flow of weapons across the entire region.

Members recognised the importance of the existence of suitable regional infrastructure for the implementation of strategies to maintain regional peace and security. The global approach was strongly recommended, because it is the only way to create a path for the sharing of information and human resources.

Notwithstanding, some members felt that the problems must be classified locally, then regionally, and ultimately globally. Members were encouraged by the progress made in the promotion of the socio-economic agenda in some countries of the region, while stressing the need for governments to establish deradicalisation and social reintegration programmes. In closing, members expressed the hope that governments would support the initiatives for sustainable peace, stability, and security.

Gender-based violence in humanitarian crises and the challenges they pose

Members noted that gender-based violence continues to be a major challenge for developed and developing countries alike, with the problem being exacerbated in contexts of war or armed conflict.

They acknowledged that it is still difficult to evaluate actions taken to combat gender-based violence, and called for the establishment of appropriate measures, to help combat gender-based violence and fully integrate this issue into governmental approaches.

Members took note of the underfunding of projects aimed at supporting initiatives to combat gender-based violence, the consequences of the humanitarian crisis, and the peace consolidation process, and called for greater mobilisation of the international community in this regard.

They also called for the establishment of a suitable legal structure and an inclusive policy, the inclusion of women in the process of combating gender-based violence, the use of media to raise public awareness about the issue, the setting up of preventative education programmes, and the creation of a court responsible for handling matters relating to women.

Members took due note of the EU initiative – the Call to Action Road Map 2016-2020 – which concentrates on gender-based violence as an integral part of humanitarian aid. Among the objectives of the Call to Action are prevention, response, and the promotion of gender equality.

Members were also informed of initiatives, such as the creation of legal clinics, which have encouraged victims of gender-

based crimes to speak out, since they are user-friendly and provide access to justice.

Site visit

In the context of the meeting, members visited the Ecole International des Forces de Sécurité (International Security Forces School), which has an international and, above all, regional orientation. It provides short and long-term training and is also involved in research, in areas that support domestic and international peace and security.

Members took note of this training initiative, of major importance for the region, to improve security governance and promote shared standards within the security forces. They also expressed the hope that these trainings could also be pursued by participants from other countries in the region.

Environmental crime and natural resources

Environmental crime in Central Africa: major threats

Members noted that the main security threats in this area in Central Africa stem from poaching, wildlife and ivory trafficking, and the loss of natural habitats due to the deforestation caused by the legal and illegal felling of trees.

They listened keenly to a presentation on the security situation in border areas in the Central African region, where, due to a lack of State authority, armed cross-border groups are operating with impunity, triggering mass population displacements into neighbouring areas. The fragility and weakness of the authorities is not only affecting local populations, but also the fauna and flora.

Members expressed their concern about the prevalence of poaching in the region, which reveals that criminal syndicates are well ahead of the efforts made by governments to prevent crime or to make the necessary arrests. While acknowledging the EU's financial support for the African Parks programme aimed at eradicating this scourge, members underscored the need for a more coordinated regional approach. Members underscored the need for long-term investment in protected areas, which would help to create oases of stability and good governance in one of the most difficult environments in Africa.

Members proposed the following concrete recommendations:

- Request that government representatives implement agreements on protection zones;
- Request support from governments for delegate management systems for the protected areas;
- Request that all States in the region adopt laws to control the movement of livestock and neo-pastoralism, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR);
- Find appropriate solutions to the neo-pastoralism phenomenon where massive herds of livestock are pushed into frontier zones where governance is limited;
- Request support from the international community to set up a financing mechanism based on public-private partnership; and
- Call on Central African governments to work together to combat the scourge of transnational and trans-regional violence.

Terrorism Financing

Members were informed of the increase in crime in the region, linked to serious economic crises, rural and cross-border crime, and wide-scale hostage-taking along the borders, especially with the presence of the Lords Resistance Army (LRA). Members were informed of the need for governments to prioritise youth involvement and to respond to their concerns, so as to prevent them from being drawn into criminal activities.

Members took due note that terrorism financing must be constantly and systematically analysed. The uncontrolled circulation of fiduciary money, which is the counterpart of an excessively low level of use of the banking system for financial transactions, facilitates the diversion of cash flows to terrorist groups. Increased control and traceability of financial transactions is urgent, also with a view to stemming illicit cross-border flows.

In addition, members were informed that hostage ransoms are also sources of financing. Terrorism, wildlife, and environmental crime have also been used to finance arms smuggling.

Finally, the members invited the Co-Presidents to present the conclusions of this regional meeting at the 36th session of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly in Cotonou, Benin, in December 2018 and to send them to the ACP Parliamentary Assembly, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Council, the ACP Council of Ministers, the Regional Economic Communities of Central Africa, the ACP States of Central Africa, the Pan-African Parliament, the Commission of the African Union, the ACP Group of States, and the Member States of the European Union (EU).

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