**Africa Summary**

# Cameroon across the Divide: Foreign Policy Priorities in West and Central Africa

HE Pierre Moukoko Mbonjo

Minister of Foreign Relations, Republic of Cameroon

2 September 2013

## INTRODUCTION

The following document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 2 September 2013 with HE Pierre Moukoko Mbonjo, the minister of foreign relations of the Republic of Cameroon.

Mr Mbonjo discussed the political system, governance, media and economic development of Cameroon but the focus of the meeting was upon the country's foreign policy in the region. Topics included the importance of peaceful resolutions to disagreements, the role of regional organizations, economic integration, counter-terrorism, stability and maritime security. By way of the question and answer session, a range of further issues were discussed, including social issues in Cameroon itself and the government's approach to international organizations beyond Africa.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

## PIERRE MOUKOKO MBONJO

Mr Mbonjo outlined the semi-presidential system of Cameroon. The president is directly elected by universal suffrage as the executive and power is shared with the prime minister as the head of government. There is a bicameral legislative system and a separate judiciary. Mr Mbonjo described Cameroon as a haven of peace and stability with an educated and youthful population in a conflict-plagued sub-region. There are significant mineral resources, forests and hydroelectric power potential in the country.

Cameroon's president instituted a new policy based upon two principles: rigour and realization. Mr Mbonjo said that there has been progress in democracy, governance and human rights. Cameroon's president is determined to continue with current reforms, and with reforms to the business environment. He explained the important role that freedom plays in the development of nations, and described Cameroon's adherence to regional and international instruments on these issues.

Mr Mbonjo said that there have been more than 300 political parties in existence in Cameroon since 1990, and argued that they operate freely. He said that the institutions of democracy are also strengthening. Cameroon has an independent electoral commission, and in 2012 new legislation was introduced to establish a single electoral code, introduce biometric technology to be used in the electoral process and to revise the voters list. In April 2013, the establishment of the senate was completed, and it can now play its full legislative role and control government action.

According to Mr Mbonjo, the decentralization process has been difficult to implement, but plans are on track. Regarding human rights and civil liberties, Cameroon has enhanced the capacity of the National Commission of Human Rights and Freedoms created in July 2004. It has reformed detention conditions, the judicial system and prisons. The minister argued that the media landscape in Cameroon confirms that rights and freedoms are guaranteed by the government. The country has 13 television stations, 600 print media organizations and about 100 radio stations. Only one of each is publicly owned.

The minister went on to explain the Cameroonian government's commitment to improving governance, including fighting against corruption through a variety of programmes and bodies. He highlighted the importance of economic governance, and the need to address budgeting and the award of public contracts. Cameroon is a candidate to join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and is also a member of the Kimberly Process.

Mr Mbonjo stated that Cameroon has experienced a long period of economic restructuring with initial focus placed on debt repayment, as advised by the International Monetary Fund. Cameroon now has its own development programme, complies with the Paris Declaration of 2005 and intends to become an emergent democratic country.

Mr Mbonjo described peace as a cornerstone of Cameroon's foreign policy, which is also based upon the twin principles of non-interference and international law. Cameroon enjoys good relationships with other states on this basis. The country plays a part in the fight against terrorism, defending its national territorial integrity and supporting both the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU). Cameroon has strong bilateral and multilateral relationships and is currently a member of the Peace and Security Council of the AU.

Cameroon also advocates the integration of the central African region and rejects the use of power politics. Mr Mbonjo explained that the peaceful resolution of disputes is preferred, and pointed to the example of the Bakassi Peninsula dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria, which was resolved after international arbitration. Mr Mbonjo explained that Cameroon respects the territorial integrity of each country and is committed to conflict resolution in Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), for example by sending troops to the Central African Republic (CAR) and also hosting a regional summit on maritime security.

Cameroon is in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 2039 and organized the first ever meeting between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), ECCAS and the Gulf of Guinea Commission, bringing together 25 countries and mutualizing their efforts in maritime security. Mr Mbonjo said that there have been no attacks in Cameroonian waters since 2011. Cameroon has a specialist military unit to address maritime security and was chosen to host an Inter-Regional Coordination Centre for the fight against piracy.

Mr Mbonjo expressed gratitude on behalf of Cameroon to the United Kingdom for the provision of maps, legal expertise and support during the case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). After the ICJ's verdict in 2002, it took 12 years to implement the agreement between Nigeria and Cameroon. He explained that four million Nigerians are resident in Cameroon and one million Cameroonians live in Nigeria, so cooperation between the countries is essential.

The minister concluded by emphasizing Cameroon's size. He said that the country has a population of 20 million, is 470,000 square kilometres in size, and is multi-ethnic and democratic. Mr Mbonjo explained that Cameroon has had a power-sharing coalition government since 1992. There are currently four parties in government and three in opposition. He ended by describing Cameroon as a country with a free press and an adjusted economy.

## SUMMARY OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### Questions

Will the broader problem of borders in Africa ever be addressed?

Regarding the capacity of ECCAS to manage regional problems, was the disaster in CAR a turning point?

Is the Commonwealth important to Cameroon?

### Pierre Moukoko Mbonjo

Mr Mbonjo explained that borders are a delicate issue in Africa. He said that the continent is trying to move on and make the best of the borders inherited from colonial powers. He argued that accommodation is essential – while there were changes to Sudan's border because of the creation of South Sudan, this was a result of war and must not be repeated.

Mr Mbonjo went on to state that modern statehood was imported from Western Europe during colonial times, and Africa had to develop nations after the states have already appeared. The minister outlined the emergence of pan-Africanism in the 1960s, which had the aim of rapid political union. But the opposing view at the time was that infrastructure was a more important priority than a rapid unification process – this second argument won the debate. The AU now accepts the notion of five regional blocs. Borders, according to Mr Mbonjo, should be used as an opportunity. For example, Cameroon and Nigeria are in different regional blocs but no visa is needed to cross their border.

Mr Mbonjo explained that in the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), the free movement of people between all six member countries will finally be allowed from January 2014.

Regarding conflict resolution, Mr Mbonjo said that the actions of ECCAS over CAR should be commended, as Cameroon and member countries contributed troops. There is the political will to stabilize the country and it is widely recognized that the situation in CAR is a concern for other states. However, the situation has become so difficult that the AU and UN have become involved too. Nevertheless, a high proportion of troops are from ECCAS and it has played a positive role.

With regards to the Commonwealth, Mr Mbonjo outlined Cameroon's history. Cameroon was once a German protectorate, but never a colony in the formal

sense. In 1916 Germany lost control of Cameroon and by 1919 it was administered by the League of Nations, becoming a trusteeship after the Second World War. The year 1961 saw the reunification of the former British and French Cameroons. Initially, there was no desire on the part of the Cameroonians to join either the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) or the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, after a change in government, Cameroon eventually joined both organizations. Mr Mbonjo said that Cameroon now belongs to both of these 'families'. However, he pointed out that Cameroon has a minister of state for the Commonwealth but not one for the OIF.

## Questions

Is there a danger that unless Article 347 of the Penal Code is overturned, Cameroon will be in violation of its own domestic law that states that criminal law should be subject to international law?

Regarding the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline, an expansion project is being proposed. What is the status of the negotiations?

In 2009 Cameroon signed an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU. What is the impact of this agreement on the region and does it hinder efforts at maintaining regional economic integration?

Could the solutions of the Cameroon-Nigeria border disagreement be implemented in the case of Sudan-South Sudan?

What policy does Cameroon have in cooperating with its neighbours to confront Boko Haram?

## Pierre Moukoko Mbonjo

Mr Mbonjo said that regarding the criminal code and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBTs), it is important to understand that each country needs to reach a certain stage in development prior to accepting LGBTs and laws take time to develop. Mr Mbonjo said that same-sex relationships are not an issue in Cameroon because they are not yet publicly accepted. However, he claimed that LGBTs are not victimized. He said that in Cameroon, people can do as they like in private. Even heterosexual couples cannot be intimate in public. He said that although the government does not victimize LGBTs, society takes time to change its attitudes – this was also the United Kingdom's experience.

Regarding the Chad-Cameroon pipeline, Mr Mbonjo reiterated that Cameroon does not project power. He said that negotiations are still taking place, and argued that, as the issue of the transit fees charged by Cameroon was last discussed 20 years ago, an increase must now be negotiated. Mr Mbonjo expressed his hope that these changes will be made.

Mr Mbonjo said that the interim agreement signed with the EU has not yet been ratified because first there must be an agreement between the six members of CEMAC. He said that this will not be an easy process, because the EU has placed significant pressure on Cameroon to ratify the interim agreement. The minister explained that Cameroon has been attempting to communicate to the EU that it would be better to first reach a general agreement between all of the six CEMAC countries.

Regarding South Sudan, Mr Mbonjo said that he had attended a meeting with the presidents of Sudan and South Sudan. He said that at the meeting he had discussed the example of the peaceful resolution of the dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria. The minister said that the benefits of peace are obvious, and gave the example of the impact that the Bakassi dispute could have had on Nigeria's globalised and fast-growing economy. Mr Mbonjo explained that was therefore worth waiting 20 years for a peaceful solution. He said that a peaceful resolution of the dispute between Sudan and South Sudan is very much encouraged.

Mr Mbonjo said that Boko Haram has not yet become an issue in Cameroon. He argued that in general religion had never been a major issue in Cameroon, and many people from different religions peacefully coexist in the country. The minister said it was therefore surprising to see what is happening in Nigeria. Cameroon is helping Nigeria to fight against Boko Haram and this effort is yielding positive results. As a result of the instability in Nigeria, there are now 10,000 Nigerian refugees in Cameroon. Mr Mbonjo agreed that there was a danger that some of these refugees could actually Boko Haram militants He pointed out that the Nigerian and Cameroonian intelligence services are working together, and that the countries reached an agreement on cross-border security in February 2012. Mr Mbonjo explained the importance of containing Boko Haram, and said that Cameroon is giving its full support to the federal government of Nigeria in this endeavour.