

“Let’s talk human rights”

FNF Human Rights Podcast– Cameroon II_Season 3_Episode 1_Transcript

[00:00:00] **Masechaba Mdaka:** The voices of Cameroonian human rights defenders, one of which has been disguised for security reasons.

[00:00:10] **Voice note 1:** I will say that human rights defenders in Cameroon have a voice, but they are struggling to find themselves in the country because many, a times, human right defenders don't want to say they're activists but rather would say they're advocating for human rights because nobody wants to find themselves in trouble. They don't want to be killed.

Voice Note 2: The Cameroonian crisis has impacted me in many negative ways, ranging from moments where I had to go on strike for two years or the lawyer strike where I was depending on handouts from family in France, the point where I had to move my family.

[00:00:54] As a matter of fact, my family is still internally displaced. And then I had to come back and then start [00:01:00] looking for means, and then had to close my office and join some other colleagues. When, what was it? The point where my village was burnt down and a family member was killed.

[00:01:09] **Voice Note 3:** Talking about experiencing frightening situations here in Cameroon, one would see that seriously, linking it to those of us living in the rustic areas where the war is currently going on, or yes, everyone has experienced a frightening situation.

[00:01:30] Talk less of people who stand to defend and promote human rights. I pray one day God almighty will grant me the opportunity to share my horrible experience with maximum security over my life and family.

[00:01:46] **Esther Njomo Omam:** I think it was possible to leave a free live in Cameroon depending of course from which other country you come from and without you're French or English speaking.

[00:01:55] **Masechaba Mdaka:** I warmly welcome you to our next "Let's talk human rights" podcast episode. My name is Masechaba Mdaka and I am happy that you have tuned in again.

If you've been following this podcast journey through Sub-saharan Africa for the last two seasons with host, Nangamso Kwinana, you would have met some exciting people. In the upcoming episodes, we will meet more interesting experts, and learn more about the human rights situation in various African countries.

[00:02:26] Our journey today is taking us back to Cameroon. If you've missed our previous episode on Cameroon, take a listen. You'll find the links in this podcast's show notes.

Our last episode explored the anglophone crisis in Cameroon

[00:02:46] **Nangamso Kwinana:** Elvis would you come in as a bilingual speak of both English and French, how can a country in which the population does not speak a mutual language prevent such conflicts in the future?

[00:03:01] **Elvis:** Well, uh, thank you, uh, with, uh, I'll start by just saying that, uh, you know, Cameroon has over 250 ethnic groups and there are, uh, 24 major tribal languages, uh, groups used in the country alongside French and English, you already mentioned as the official language. The multiplicity of this ethnic conflict that is both armed and unarmed and the crisis of the tribalistic orientation of the states tensions between communities and the emergency of ethano-regional social movements are all indicators of these present crisis that we are facing right now.

[00:03:45] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Today we'll be looking at the unfolding situation in Cameroon. Currently the two English speaking regions of Cameroon are witnessing an escalation of violence that has led to the death of several people.

This is a result of violent confrontations between Cameroon's military and the defence forces of Ambazonia. Ambazonia is an independent state in the Anglophone regions of Southern Cameroon. Since the AFCON Cup, the main international men's association of football competition in Africa, there has been a rise in kidnappings, mass arrests, detentions as well as attacks on educational establishments.

[00:04:29] Now, to give us some more input on this topic, I am **very pleased to have Esther Njomo Omam joining me.**

Esther, founder and Executive Director of *Reach Out Cameroon* is one of Cameroon's leading women peacebuilders and women's rights advocates. For over 26 years, Esther has represented and been the voice of grassroots women and youth suffering diverse human rights abuses, marginalization, and disempowerment.

Esther was the first woman to testify at the hearing at the UN Security Council on the humanitarian crisis in Cameroon in 2019 shining a light on the Anglophone crisis plaguing the Northwest and Southwest regions and achieving international recognition for it. At the time, this was one of the most neglected crises in the world. Esther, thank you for joining us today for this very important episode. Could you, in 2 to 3 sentences summarise what has happened in the Anglophone crisis?

[00:05:35] **Esther Njomo Omam:** Well, what has happened during the Anglophone crisis is that our people have been subjected to so much pains and sufferings, uh, for that, which they never bargained for.

[00:05:46] There've been so many killings, atrocities committed as tradition killings, and arbitrary arrests. You've had a property destroyed. You have huge, [00:06:00] uh, internet, internet, uh, displacements and people fleeing into neighbouring countries. This is what we've seen for the past few years. We've had children who have been denied access to schools, to education.

[00:06:21] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Cameroon's renowned member of the Senate from the Northwest region and prominent human rights lawyer and activist, Senator Henry Kemende, was brutally murdered at his Bamenda hometown on Tuesday, 11 January 2022 during the start of the Africa Cup of Nations tournament in Cameroon.

[00:06:42] Senator Kemende was a lawyer and lawmaker for the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party, one of Cameroon's main opposition parties. How was the senator's assassination related to the Anglophone crisis? Would you say that potentially this crime was politically motivated?

[00:07:03] **Esther Njomo Omam:** This is just one of the many killings which have occurred in the cause of the ongoing crisis in the two restive regions. We've had so many people, so many personalities will have lost their lives to this crisis and Senator Kemende is just one of the unfortunate ones who will equally, uh, fell victim of the senseless war, which, uh, we live everyday.

[00:07:37] Talking if it's politically motivated, I will then say, because up to now, nobody has claimed responsibility of his killing. But one thing we know is that he is somebody who spoke truth to power. He, he, he was always outspoken, trying to point out one or two issues of, uh, [00:08:00] Uh, what was going wrong in, in the cause of all what we are living in our two restive, uh, regions, uh, that alone could attract enmity, but I want to tell you something. This war has made so many victims from innocent people.

[00:08:27] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther, how in your view has the government of Cameroon responded to Senator Kemende's death, especially in light of his funeral, which has just taken place this past weekend?

[00:08:39] **Esther Njomo Omam:** Well, uh, one thing I will say is that, uh, the death of Senator Kemende, uh, shook us to the core because this is also one personality in this country who mattered, just like any other life, which mattered.

[00:08:56] We saw his colleagues, uh, the Senate, you know, [00:09:00] uh, respect moments of silence for him, uh, by the way our police saw during his funeral, the state sending representatives, you know, to, uh, honor him by decorating in postmortem. This is what we know about government's concern. Uh, his death concerns all of us, not only the government, it concerns civil society.

[00:09:28] It concerns the civilians and if only the government and most particularly his party, which he belonged to. And, um, I would not talk so much about government's reaction. I want to talk about our reaction. What is the reaction of each and everyone of us Cameroonians, you know, with regards to Senator Kemende's death, what does it tells us?

[00:09:51] What does it reminds us? It tells us, it reminds us that to the time has come to let dry bones go. The time has come, you know, [00:10:00] for us to face the issues and speak it out. The time has come for us to consider violence as the enemy and not the individuals. You know, life has become so cheap in my country today that for just nothing, a common issue, people's lives are taken away. You know, as if they were taking a chicken to the slaughter house. And we as saying that this should not be the case. When you say something that drives some people and the next moment that you are no longer, you are no more there.

[00:10:35] You're not alive. You're killed. Why should it be so? So again, I'm reiterating that a time has come for us to consider the violence as the enemy and not individuals. It is the sole responsibility of each and every one of us to put in energy in denouncing such killings, in condemning them and doing that, which is the right thing. Doing that which is the right thing is that each and every one of us to become immediate.

[00:11:06] Whatever we'll find ourselves, which will peace builders be whatever we find ourselves. There is nothing that cannot be arranged. We all owe it treaty to build bridges of peace at this moment. When we look at the devastating effects caused by this ongoing crisis and where people go after their greed and not putting the people's interests first.

[00:11:32] We have a crisis which is not people centered. We have leadership who will say they're fighting or working for the benefit of the people but these same people are the victims of the cruelty of what is going on.

[00:11:48] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther, indeed I do share your sentiments, um, regarding Senator Kemende's death. It did send shock waves, not only in Cameroon, but globally, especially on the African continent.

[00:11:57] You have already cited that, you know, Senator Kemende's death among other deaths which have taken place unfortunately in Cameroon. Um, Senator Kemende is, is not an exception. Um, what is happening in Cameroon right now, as we speak?

[00:12:15] **Esther Njomo Omam:** As we speak, uh, two days ago, a lady just lost her life. A health care worker of the Cameroon baptist health services lost her life.

[00:12:31] She was shot dead by some gunman simply because she went to carry out health programs in the community. She went out for a life-saving mission and upon return, she and her colleagues were shot. And unfortunately she lost her life. This is what [00:13:00] has been going on in this country these days.

[00:13:09] Recently a boarding school was burnt down to ashes. Everything, varying the private children from education, simply because they separated the Gnostic group would not want them to go and much for the 11th of February. During AFCON, children were being brutalized simply because they went to school. Simply because they want to be educated.

[00:13:54] This is what has been happening.

[00:13:58] We have [00:14:00] communities which have been destroyed. We have houses. Which have burnt down in their villages by the military in search of non-state armed groups. We have people who are denied access to their primary source of income,

which is their farms. And what have you, this is what is going on these days in our restive regions.

[00:14:35] So many killings, so many destructions, so much deprivation leading to pains and suffering.

[00:14:53] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther we stated in the beginning of the our podcast that the two English speaking regions in Cameroon are witnessing an escalation of violence leading to the death of several people and you have now just informed us about what has just taken place two days ago in the country among other developing stories. Did the increase in the violence only begin with the Africa cup tournament? The soccer tournament?

[00:15:21] **Esther Njomo Omam:** I wouldn't say so. We've had, we've seen violence before AFCON and we've seen violence after AFCON. AFCON was just one of the targets, you know, uh, uh, during which we saw other forms of violence - the use of improvised explosive devices.

[00:15:41] They've started using them before AFCON and we continue hearing about gunshots, bombing and the usage of [00:16:00] these ideas. You know, in some parts of our restive, uh, uh, regions. So when we talk about this collision, really, there was a time when we thought it would be a time of no return.

[00:16:19] This was 2019. This was 2021 where we saw people being beheaded. Women being killed in a very, very dehumanising way. And with AFCON, we saw the use of ideas in the town of Limbe where the tournament was [00:17:00] being played. We heard about people being killed. We heard about women being brutalized in other places.

[00:17:14] We've had children who were shot while going to school and, we saw Mr Kemende being killed in the Northwest, not in the Southwest where the tournament was been played. So basically what do I mean? What I mean is that ever since the start of this conflict, we've seen the dynamics changing every time.

[00:17:50] We do not have a particular time when we'll say, uh, violence has decreased [00:18:00] or is stable. You have periods where you have escalating violence and you have periods where you think everything is going back to normalcy. And then just all the sudden you or hear again about escalation of violence. So I wouldn't say it is because of AFCON, but what I will say for sure is that during AFCON we had incidents of violence

[00:18:34] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther, you speak to the changing dynamic of the escalation and violence, um, with the game changing if one would call it that, what are the people of Cameroon expecting from the government right now?

[00:18:50] **Esther Njomo Omam:** Yes, first of all, when I talk about the, uh, uh, changing dynamics of this conflict is because, uh, in the beginning it was without arms.

[00:18:59] We saw people getting the non-state groups, get them, them guns and half that we saw them getting AK 47. And then today we are hearing about the improviser explosive devices, IEDs and other forms of arms, modern arms which are being used today.

[00:19:26] And each time we, we hear about, uh, violence or a collision of violence, something else comes up to bring back violence. And that's why we talk about the changing. Um, we talk about the changing dynamics. You have the ghost towns, which are imposed. You have the lockdowns, which are imposed because of one event or the, the, the, or the other.

[00:19:51] And I would say that today people are getting tired. The general impression is that people are tired. People [00:20:00] are tired because this conflict finally is now on the people on the civilians, the innocent civilians whom the armed groups claim to be working for, you know. Now when you kill people, when you commit atrocities in communities where people's expectations were high, [00:20:26] what you get is loss of interest in all, what is happening, what you get is hopelessness. And this is the stage where we are today.

[00:20:38] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther, I just want to touch on what you have just spoken about regarding the civilian population of Cameroon. You say they are tired, they are frustrated and they are hurting. I want to bring the conversation now to the people who one would maybe regard as the front-liners in defending the space [00:21:00] around the human rights concerns, and Cameroon do human rights, defenders and opposition, politicians feel safe in Cameroon right now and Esther, if you will allow me, are there moments where you as a human rights advocate and defender fear for your life or for the lives of those that you love?

[00:21:17] **Esther Njomo Omam:** One thing is sure that if you are called a human rights defendant, then it means that you should be very careful. You should watch your steps.

[00:21:32] Look behind and on their fronts before you take any action, because definitely you are going to be victimized in one way or the other, you know. People have a narratives, where they want human rights defenders to hold on the bed. We usually say that we have our narrative, which is typical to us. We should not be forced refresh, not be coerced, you know, to, to, to use our last narrative, especially parties to the conflict.

[00:21:59] Now, when you [00:22:00] say something, which is not good for the non-state armed groups, you become a victim. And if you say something which does not please government, you are in trouble. So where do we find ourselves? We find ourselves in the middle of danger.

[00:22:24] We are caught up with, uh, this, uh, particular aspect of the left and the right, you know, watching our following carefully, our actions. The reason why we as human rights defenders try to be as impartial as much as we can so that our narrative is well levelled and targets the issues, not the people or the parties in conflict so that our narrative will conscientise the parties in conflict, made them [00:23:00] understand what is expected of them from us, the population of human rights defenders and not attack the persons.

[00:23:07] And again, as I keep saying, violence is the enemy not the instigators and of course, yes, I do not feel safe at every moment of my life. I think a, it may interest you to know that, uh, my children were kidnapped. I've been brutalized on several occasions at my house. My office operators on several occasions and we've been receiving threats every day, death threats every day.

[00:23:37] And, um, so it's not easy to be a frontliner now because every day you go out, you make a public statement. This, and then just your life, because you don't know what would take it otherwise some people do not even know about our mandate as human rights defenders. Some people, [00:24:00] you know, do not know that the, we have our code of conduct.

[00:24:05] And at times I hear people intimidating me on social media, threatening, calling, and saying that, why did you not say it this way? And I kept telling people, as I'm saying that we have a code of conduct and that we will not take what A or B wants us to take or say. We will say which we see then. When we see them, I will propose solutions then there where we analyze the things in an impartial way.

[00:24:38] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther these are indeed very harrowing accounts of your personal experience, where your work has literally brought itself into your personal space. You are a human rights defender in a country where it is not easy to freely express one's opinion. What does freedom mean to you personally?

[00:24:56] **Esther Njomo Omam:** Freedom to me is a country where I clasp the hand of my brother or sister [00:25:08] and we moved together hand-in-hand and our voices ringing with laughter. Freedom to me is a country where violence is considered the enemy and not the ad or the he, or she, this to me is freedom. This to me is peace.

[00:25:42] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther, we're coming to the end of this episode and before I ask my last question, is there anything else you would like to share with us today?

[00:25:50] **Esther Njomo Omam:** Yes, what I would like to say is that, uh, I'm calling on all Cameroonians to know that it's a collective responsibility to right the [00:26:00] wrongs right. We've been brutalized for the cause (some of us). We've been crossing through many, uh, uh, rivers for, with dangers and the roughness of the road will have discouraged us from being front liners, but we keep walking the talk [00:26:23] and we keep being resilient because we think that peace is possible and that if we all have an open mind, we can make this work. Some of us will refuse, running away from this country despite the traits. We remain resilient and true to our commitments, because we believe in the people-centred approach.

[00:26:51] We believe that talking to people, coming together to discuss about issues and resolving the conflicts, ourself is a way [00:27:00] of healing, you know. So we are calling on everyone that the time is now for us to look at each other and begin the healing process.

[00:27:09] **Masechaba Mdaka:** We are coming to the end of this episode Esther. I'd like to ask you one more question: what do you wish for the Cameroon of tomorrow, a Cameroon in which your children and an earlier conversation Esther, you even spoke about your grandchildren, [00:27:27] in the Cameroon where they will grow up safely in peace with freedoms in a country where they know they can prosper?

[00:27:35] **Esther Njomo Omam:** Yes. Firstly, going back to freedom. Freedom to me is being allowed to sit in the way I see them without being intimidated, without being mistreated. Freedom to me, it's being listened to and I'm being able to listen to the other.

[00:28:00] And what I hope for my country is to see a country where all Cameroonians move together in harmony, a country free of corruption, a country where civil liberties are respected. A country where democracy is at the top, where people can express themselves freely and resolved issues amicably without resolving to violence.

[00:28:44] This to me is my dream country, a country where my children would sing a song of love, joy, and peace. A country where my grandchildren can come and be proud of knowing that there were frontliners who paved the way for them to come and enjoy.

[00:29:09] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Esther, I would like to thank you very much for sharing your insights with us today.

[00:29:14] It has indeed been a pleasure to speak to you and talk about what this means, not only in your work, but also as I mentioned, what this has meant for you as a human being, as a human rights defender, as a mother, as a grandmother. All of these things and which really one has to commend in terms of the plight that you and the people of Cameroon are facing.

[00:29:39] And for that I say, thank you. Thank you so much for, for, for being with us today and sharing your story.

[00:29:46] **Esther Njomo Omam:** Thank you. Thank you for hearing me out, uh, and bringing me to this platform to talk about what's happening in my country. This is our little way of, uh, making the world to know that all is not well. And that we, the Cameroonians have so much work to do. [00:30:00]

[00:30:02] We must come together. Whether we like it or not, we must come together as a people to discuss our issues and try to see how we can resolve them amicably. This is what it is all about. Thank you.

[00:30:16] **Masechaba Mdaka:** That was Esther Njomo Omam for our Cameroon episode.

It's clear that people of Cameroon have suffered a great deal and the impact of this on their lives is something that they didn't bargain for.

[00:30:30] Esther's reflection that it's time to - and I quote - "let dry bones go" and the fact that human life in Cameroon has been

cheapened by this ongoing conflict is evidence that we need to consider violence as the enemy and not each other.

Dialogue needs to be more inclusive, there needs to be a responsible narrative around the issues at hand and the importance to do no harm in conflict - even when one's own life is under threat.

[00:30:58] Even when one's own life is under threat. [00:31:00] My rights, your rights, our rights humanity is for. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation sub-Saharan Africa (FNF) is an independent German organisation that is committed to promoting liberal ideals and politics in Africa such as human rights, the rule of law, democracy, innovation, digitization and free trade. By conducting campaigns, media events, seminars, workshops, study tours, cultural happenings and training courses the foundation promotes human rights including freedom expression, freedom of the press, children's rights and LGBTQI+ rights and engages against violence against women and capital punishment.

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