



ESFA

Ethical and Sustainable Future for All

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ESFA STATEMENT ON THE LENIENT SENTENCING OF THE PERPETRATORS OF THE NGARBUH MASSACRE IN CAMEROON

Buea-Cameroon, 24 February 2026: Ethical and Sustainable Future for All (ESFA) expresses profound concern regarding the judgment delivered on 20 February 2026 by the Military Court in Yaoundé in relation to the massacre of 21 civilians that occurred in Ngarbuh, Donga Mantung Division, North West Region of Cameroon, on 14 February 2020.

While the convictions of three members of the security forces and one militia member represent a formal acknowledgment of criminal responsibility, the sentences imposed, ranging from five to ten years' imprisonment and modest fines, do not reflect the gravity of the crimes committed. The attack resulted in the killing of 21 unarmed civilians, including 13 children and a pregnant woman, as documented by credible human rights institutions such as Human Rights Watch. The Government's Commission of Inquiry, published on 22 April 2020, acknowledged the deaths of 13 civilians (10 children and 3 women), and confirmed that members of the security forces and allied vigilante groups were responsible for the operation during which civilians were killed and homes burned.

Under Cameroon's Penal Code, murder is punishable by life imprisonment. Co-perpetrators are subject to the same penalties as principal offenders unless otherwise provided by law. In light of this legal framework, the imposition of five- to ten-year custodial sentences constitutes a strikingly lenient penalty for crimes involving multiple civilian deaths, including children, and the destruction of homes and property. The principle of proportionality, recognized both in domestic criminal jurisprudence and in international criminal law, requires that punishment correspond to the seriousness of the offense. In this instance, the sentencing fails to satisfy that standard.

Furthermore, ESFA underscores that the killings in Ngarbuh constitute serious violations of international human rights law and international criminal law. The intentional killing of civilians during a non-international armed conflict violates Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law. Moreover, widespread or systematic attacks directed against a civilian population may amount to crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The gravity of the Ngarbuh incident, including the killing of children and a pregnant woman, the burning of homes, and the alleged attempt to conceal the crimes, warrants accountability measures commensurate with international standards of justice, deterrence, and reparation.

ESFA is equally concerned by the limited scope of accountability. No senior military officials were arrested or charged under the doctrine of command responsibility, despite findings that the operation had been authorized at battalion level. The failure to investigate and prosecute individuals in positions of effective control undermines the integrity of the proceedings and contravenes established principles of international criminal accountability, which recognize that

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superiors may be held criminally responsible for crimes committed by subordinates where they knew or should have known and failed to prevent or punish such acts.

Additionally, several armed Fulani militia members reportedly involved in the killings were not brought to justice. The selective prosecution of a limited number of direct perpetrators, without comprehensive investigation into all alleged participants and enablers, creates an accountability gap that perpetuates impunity.

The procedural shortcomings observed during the trial further raise serious due process and fair trial concerns. The proceedings were repeatedly delayed over a period exceeding five years. The court reportedly rejected key evidentiary submissions, including death certificates intended to establish the identity of all victims. Victims' families were afforded minimal participation, with only three relatives and one witness testifying. The military court's location, approximately 500 kilometers from Ngarbuh, posed substantial logistical barriers for affected families, effectively limiting their access to justice. Moreover, the court rejected compensation claims submitted on behalf of victims' families, thereby denying them meaningful reparations for the irreparable harm suffered.

The right to an effective remedy is firmly established under international human rights law, including Article 2(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Cameroon is a State Party. This right encompasses access to justice, adequate reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition. The denial of compensation in this case compounds the injustice endured by survivors and bereaved families, many of whom continue to suffer trauma and economic hardship as a direct result of the attack.

ESFA acknowledges and commends the efforts of the defense counsel representing the victims, particularly Barrister Sother, whose sustained commitment to the pursuit of justice has been instrumental in ensuring that the case remained before the court despite repeated setbacks. Their work exemplifies the critical role of human rights defenders in combating impunity and upholding the rule of law.

However, symbolic convictions without proportionate sentencing and comprehensive accountability do not equate to full justice. Justice must not only be done; it must be seen to be done. Lenient sentencing in cases involving mass civilian killings risks undermining public confidence in the judicial system, weakening deterrence, and perpetuating cycles of violence in conflict-affected regions.

ESFA therefore calls upon the competent Cameroonian authorities to:

1. Ensure that appellate mechanisms are utilized to review and, where appropriate, enhance sentences to reflect the gravity of the crimes committed.
2. Conduct independent and impartial investigations into potential command responsibility at higher levels of the military hierarchy.
3. Reopen and fairly adjudicate claims for compensation and reparations to victims' families.

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4. Guarantee greater victim participation in proceedings and remove structural barriers to access to justice.
5. Implement institutional reforms aimed at preventing recurrence, including strengthened oversight of military operations in civilian areas.

The Ngarbuh massacre remains a painful chapter in Cameroon's ongoing crisis. For the families who lost children, mothers, and loved ones, justice delayed and diluted is justice denied. ESFA reiterates that accountability for grave human rights violations is not optional; it is a legal and moral obligation under both national and international law.

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