

PRESS BRIEFING

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE

MINISTER OF FORESTRY AND

WILDLIFE

Yaounde, 22 July 2020

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press,

I would like to start by welcoming you heartily to this exchange forum which will definitely throw some light on the gazetting of the Ebo forest area, in the Nkam and Sanaga Maritime Divisions of the Littoral Region. From the onset, I am aware that everything has been said on this issue, for better or for worse.

As bad information very often eclipses the good during this social media era, the Minister of Forestry and Wildlife has the duty to inform the national and international press of what they need to understand this issue which, in normal times, should be an ordinary operation within my Ministry. Of course, out of the 22.5 million hectares of forest that Cameroon has, 13 million hectares are gazetted. There are 103 Forest Management Units in Cameroon, 68 of which are operational. They have been managed so far without any hitches.

The Prime Minister, Head of Government, by Decree N°2020/3216 of 14 July 2020, authorised the gazetting of a 68,385 hectare portion of the State's Private Estate as a Forest Management Unit known as FMU 07 006. This decision puts a final stop to the debate on this issue which has generated a vast misinformation campaign.

The gazetting of a forest, you must know, is done exclusively in the interest of the State. It outlines the procedure by which a forest belonging to the non-permanent forest estate or belonging to a private individual, or part thereof, is incorporated into the permanent forest estate. **The State thus assigns the forest** to a specific purpose (creation of a Protected Area or exploitation). It may also

be assigned to an entity (case of a Council forest). It is therefore a regulatory act enshrined in the texts in force in Cameroon.

So what is the cause of the problem with the Ebo forest area?

The gazetting process of the Ebo Forest as a National Park started with the signing of the Public Notice **N°0219/AP/MINFOF/SG/DFAP of May 3, 2006** declaring part of the Ebo Forest an area of public utility, and was completed in 2012.

At the time, the factors that had motivated the gazetting of this 141,706 hectare area were related to the richness of its biodiversity in terms of both flora and fauna.

MINFOF was unable to achieve the desired outcome due to lack of support from a greater majority of the population for the Park's creation project, despite massive awareness campaigns carried out in the field with the support of active conservation partners. WWF and WCS are conducting research activities on certain emblematic species such as elephants, the cross river gorilla and chimpanzees in that area.

The warranty as well as the expectations demanded by these populations did not match required standards in this area. This is what contributed to the process being delayed, despite several attempts to re-engage discussions, all of which proved unsuccessful.

Indeed, the gazetting process of the Ebo National Park had sparked off passions and divisions among the actors on ground (Councils, communities) between supporters and opponents of the project.

Today, we can see that these divisions have not mended as evidenced by the rumours that continue to be generated by this issue.

For some, the National Park could guarantee substantial income thanks to the development of ecotourism, while for others, the priority was rather to open up the area as a factor that could encourage the resettlement of populations displaced during the gloomy days of the *maquis* that preceded independence. For the latter, the creation of FMUs in the area represented an opportunity to boost local development, open up the area and create jobs for young people, in an area which remains one of the most interior in the country. It is this second category of actors that, thanks to the support of the traditional authorities, has taken the upper hand over the rest of the population.

It goes without saying that this failure, despite Government's efforts in forest control and monitoring, ultimately exposed the area to strong pressures, including illegal logging and poaching.

Between 2012 and 2019, pressure on the area's forest resources increased, forcing MINFOF to take strong measures to reconfigure the area, in a bid to reconcile conservation and development imperatives.

This new configuration takes into account:

- the creation of a Forest Management Unit in this area;
- recognition of the importance of the area's biodiversity;

- development, with a view to conservation, of a residual portion of over 10,000 hectares located in Mbam et Inoubou Division, linked to the various conservation areas by wildlife migration corridors.

It should be noted that logging is governed by instruments that allow for the protection of biodiversity in general and wildlife in particular. These include Decision No. 117/D/SETAT/SG of 20 March 2019, relating to the close monitoring of wildlife management in production forests throughout the national territory, which highlights the "Government's ecological awareness" and its concern for the preservation of the country's wildlife resources.

In the same vein, actors in the field of research will be able to continue their activities within the FMU thus created.

This approach, whose aim is to reconcile conservation and socio-economic stakes, especially at a time when production industries are experiencing unrivalled challenges, was backed by majority of the local populations during the campaigns to raise awareness conducted in the field during the two divisional commissions organised in Yabassi in the Nkam and Edéa in the Sanaga-Maritime respectively.

Indeed, the gazetted FMU shall have a management plan, an Environmental and Social Impact Study with consensus-based specifications as provided for by the Forestry Law, which shall take into account conservation actions of biodiversity. This prospect shall enable the private sector to create wealth, and will offer the State,

councils and neighbouring communities, opportunities in terms of income and job creation.

What about the political and strategic vision on the management of the forest and wildlife sub-sector?

As you know, the political and strategic vision of the forest and wildlife sub-sector is geared towards the sustainable management of all its forest and wildlife resources under a forest cover of about 22.5 million hectares of surface area. This vision is stipulated in Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 to institute Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries Regulation in Cameroon, namely in Article 22 that prescribes that: “ Permanent forests shall cover at least 30% of the total surface area of the national territory and shall represent Cameroon’s ecological diversity. Each permanent forest must be under a management plan adopted by the relevant administration”.

Likewise, the innovative spirit hinting zoning plan and land use plan, Decree No. 95-678-PM of 18 December 1995 to institute an indicative framework for land use in southern forest areas. This Decree shall enable to create forest land survey by putting in place a permanent forest estate (forests in private estate) and a non-permanent forest estate (forest in the national estate).

These legal frameworks and several others which have raised a national ecological and climatic awareness, are fundamental for the forestry administration in order to carry out actions that have made it possible to have an area of Permanent Forest Estate (DFP) of 16,530.213.07 ha, thus:

- ✓ 9,574,668.07 ha for protected areas, the area twice that of Forest Management Units (UFA), which demonstrates the political will of the State focused on wildlife conservation;
- ✓ 6,955,545 ha for FMUs, council forests and other forest reserves. As part of their development, FMUs take into account wildlife and diversity areas. The best example is from the East Region where most of the hunting zones are covered by FMUs.

This reality confirms the idea that the challenge in terms of land use may be that of an ability capable to optimally reconcile the management of several types of activities in the same space, using sustainable development tools and forest certification.

Fellow journalists,

Contrary to rumours that have been spreading for several months, the activities of the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, whether in the forestry or conservation fields, have nothing to do with land grabbing. The state, depending on the stakes at hand, may choose to gazette or declassify a forest.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the exploitation of sector information. Stakeholders who intervene in our field do not always pursue the same goals. Some of them do not back the idea of logging despite the enormous economic opportunities thereof and advocate either for conservation or for outright prohibition of all human activity, including agriculture, in forest estates. They have

the right to behave as such. However, the State has the duty to reconcile all divergent interests around forests and protected areas.

While the target set by the United Nations is 12%, Cameroon remains a land of conservation with more than 30% of the territory devoted to conservation. We have willingly opted for sustainable and participatory management. Moreover, this sustainable management of forests has allowed our country to remain a timber exporter for a long time and above all to be attentive to views of populations, NGOs and the civil society. We have joined several world processes and engaged major reforms at the sub-regional level. The contrast between our enormous forest wealth and the extreme poverty of local populations is at the centre of Government's concern. This is a negative aspect that tarnishes the image of the entire sector. However, the issue here is to correct skid of local governance. Since 2005, councils and local communities have received about CFA F 160 billion representing annual forest royalties. If we include income from council and community forests, the share of leasing taxes, etc., you will understand that improving this local governance is everyone's concern, including NGOs and the civil society. .

To conclude, I hope that serenity will return within the local population of the Ebo forest area in order to allow the Government to answer all the questions that have been asked in the context of gazetting procedure. We have listened to all parties as part of this process. We shall continue to work with populations, NGOs and the civil society for the balanced management of our biodiversity. This

case would not have been concluded successfully if the Head of State did not personally approve and monitor it very closely. It should must be underscore here that, he has engaged Cameroon to all initiatives for the sustainable management of forests in the world.

Thank you for your kind attention.