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February 24, 2021

Dr. Manaouda Malachie
Minister of Public Health
Republic of Cameroon



HRW.org

RE: Transparency and Accountability of Covid-19 Spending

Dear Honorable Minister Malachie,

We hope this finds you well. We are writing on behalf of Human Rights Watch, an independent non-governmental organization that monitors human rights in over 100 countries.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have advocated for governments around the world, including in Cameroon, to ensure their spending related to Covid-19 is transparent and accountable and that it provides relief consistent with governments' human rights obligations.

We are writing regarding our concerns around transparency in Covid-19 spending in general, as well as one specific component of Cameroon's Covid-19 response where concerns have been raised about government accountability.

Human Rights Watch has previously written about its concerns regarding inadequate transparency over Covid-19 spending in Cameroon.¹ As part of the government's Rapid Credit Financing agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Cameroon committed to take several steps toward the "effective and transparent use of public funds," including by publishing semi-annual reports on

¹ "Cameroon: Investigate, Distribute Health Fund," Human Rights Watch news release, June 12, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/12/cameroon-investigate-distribute-health-fund>; Sarah Saadoun (Human Rights Watch), "In Cameroon, Government Secrecy in the Management of Funds Destined for Covid-19 Response," commentary, Le Monde, September 24, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/24/cameroon-government-secrecy-management-funds-destined-covid-19-response#>.

Covid-19-related spending; immediately publishing the backlog of all Covid-19-related procurement contracts, as well as beneficial ownership information for companies awarded contracts; and publishing any new Covid-19-related contract within 30 days of it being awarded.² We understand the IMF has revised the expectation that the government publish documents related to the results of contracts.

Based on our research, it appears that the government has not fulfilled its commitments to the IMF. To best of our knowledge, the government produced only two documents related to Covid-19 spending. In July 2020, your Ministry published a two-page statement that included some information about its Covid-19 spending, and in October it produced a second document, which is difficult to find online, listing basic information for certain Covid-19-related contracts signed between May and August 2020.³ In addition, we understand that the Contrôle Supérieur de l'État du Cameroun (CONSUPE) has begun conducting an audit of Covid-19.

The July statement from the Health Ministry, which purports to cover 22 billion FCFA of spending, includes only vague categories that provide no real possibility for the public to verify. Moreover, it relates only to health spending and has not been updated in the six months since it was published. While the October document takes the positive step of including the name of a beneficial owner of companies awarded contracts, it falls far short of providing meaningful transparency, as it contains only a several-word description of the contract. Moreover, we were not able to find it or any contracts on the website of the Public Contracts Regulatory Agency.⁴

While good governance is always critical for upholding human rights, research we conducted regarding hotels the Cameroonian government requisitioned as part of its Covid-19 response shines a light on how the twin shocks of a pandemic and an economic crisis that disproportionately hurt people in poverty raise the stakes considerably. Our research indicates that the government has not fully reimbursed the hotels it requisitioned between March and May 2020 for the purposes of isolating

² “Cameroon: Request for Disbursement Under the Rapid Credit Facility—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Cameroon,” International Monetary Fund, November 9, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2020/11/05/Cameroon-Request-for-Disbursement-Under-the-Rapid-Credit-Facility-Press-Release-Staff-Report-49865>.

³ “Radio press release relating to the transparency of management on Covid-19,” Republic of Cameroon: Ministry of Public Health news release, July 29, 2020, <https://www.minsante.cm/site/?a=fr/content/radio-press-release-relating-transparency-management-covid-19>.

⁴ “Public Contracts Regulatory Agency,” Republic of Cameroon, 2021, http://armp.cm/Home.php?WD_ACTION =SCROLLTABLE&A50=5#tzA2.

suspected or potential Covid-19 patients for their costs, forcing them to cut jobs and wages that had a devastating effect on employees. Our findings are based on interviews with 15 hotel owners, managers, and employees, as well as members of local civil society organizations, in the capital, Yaoundé, and in Douala.

We understand that the Cameroonian government requisitioned at least 30 hotels in Yaoundé and Douala between March and May 2020 to house over 300 people for up to 3 months, including those suspected of being infected with Covid-19 and travelers who may have been exposed to the virus, at considerable expense to the hotels. While the government committed to reimbursing hotels for their costs for room and board, according to five hotel managers and a senior member of the hotel union, the government made only very partial reimbursements to some hotels, and made no payments to others, effectively burdening the hotels with the high costs of providing for these guests at a time when the industry is already struggling due to pandemic-related travel restrictions.

Employees of these hotels paid a high price for government's moves to requisition the hotels without adequate compensation. According to a senior member of the hotel union, the rate of layoffs and reduced hours at the hotels that were requisitioned was higher than for other hotels. Human Rights Watch spoke with five people who had been employed at these hotels in Douala. They described the hardship they faced after losing their jobs, having their hours reduced, or being forced to work for decreased wages or no pay at all—problems compounded by the absence of any government support from either a pre-existing program or Covid-19-specific relief.

One woman, who has two children and works as a secretary at a hotel that was requisitioned in Douala, said her hours have been cut and she now receives a third of her previous salary. She described the stress of being unable to make ends meet: “It has become hard to make it to the end of the month, paying for food, the kids’ school fees, transportation fees, water and electricity bills, the rent, health expenses.... The state hasn’t helped us.” Another woman, who continues to work full time as an events manager for a hotel in Douala that was requisitioned, said she now receives only a fraction of her previous salary, and some months she received nothing at all. “I was forced to ask my brother to take care of my two children, to pay for their food and school fees,” she said.

Human Rights Watch recognizes that the pandemic and the economic crisis it triggered force governments to make difficult decisions about how it will expend limited resources to best protect the public. However, the case of these hotels underscores the importance of making these spending decisions fully transparent and accountable, so that the public can have confidence in the integrity of the government's decisions.

In light of these findings, we would appreciate your answers to the following questions by **March 16, 2021**, so that we may reflect your answers in our reporting on this issue.

1. Has the government circulated or published information on Covid-19 spending in addition to the two Ministry of Health documents referenced in this letter? If so, can you please provide any such document(s) and/or the URL address where it can be accessed?
2. Does the government intend to publish additional or updated information regarding its Covid-19 spending?
3. Is the Ministry of Health document listing Covid-19 contracts awarded between May and August 2020 available through the Public Contracts Regulatory Agency website? If so, please describe how it can be accessed from the homepage. Does the Ministry intend to update the information included in the document? Does it intend to publish the actual contracts?
4. What are the terms of reference for the ongoing audit? Will it include Covid-19 spending beyond the Health Ministry, such as the hotels that were requisitioned last year?
5. Has the government also hired an independent firm to conduct an audit in line with its commitment to the IMF?
6. How many hotels, and in which cities, did the government requisition as part of its effort to isolate people who may have been exposed to or infected by Covid-19?
7. Under what laws or regulations is the government authorized to requisition hotels or other private businesses to address the pandemic?
8. Were any rules or regulations in force governing reimbursement or compensation for hotels when their facilities were requisitioned to address Covid-19? If so, could you please detail those rules?
9. Has the government reimbursed hotels it requisitioned as part of its effort to isolate people who may have been exposed to or infected by Covid-19? If so,

how much has the government paid and how much did such hotels request to cover their expenses?

10. Did the government provide any support to those whose earnings were reduced due to the Covid-19 pandemic, or to the hotel industry?

Please provide any additional information that you believe would be helpful in providing us with a more complete or accurate understanding of the issues raised in this letter.

Thank you for your attention, and we would also welcome the opportunity to meet virtually with you or members of your team to further discuss our concerns. To schedule a meeting, or if you have any questions, please contact us at somayan@hrw.org.

Sincerely,



Mausi Segun
Executive Director
Africa Division



Arvind Ganesan
Director
Business and Human Rights

Cc: Mr. Alamine Ousmane Mey, Minister of Economy, Planning, and Regional Development, Republic of Cameroon