



Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa  
Programme des Relations Islamo-Chrétiennes en Afrique



# “WE WANT PEACE”

**PROCMURA VENTURES INTO NORTHERN REGION OF CAMEROON AMID SUICIDE BOMBING**

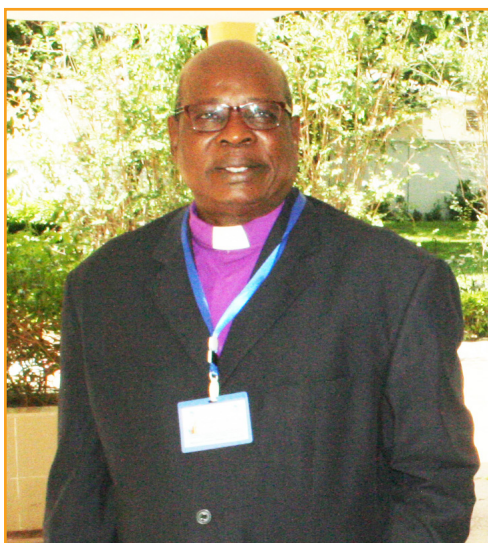
**Garoua, Cameroon | 27<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> July 2015**



## 1. Introduction

PROCMURA's commitment to live up to its vision of "an African continent where Christian and Muslim communities in spite of their differences, work together for justice, peace and reconciliation, towards the holistic development of the human family and the environment", faced its greatest challenge yet in the past three weeks.

As a result of a successful conference in Maroua, the Far North of Cameroon in January 2013 that brought together about sixty (60) Christian and Muslim religious leaders from twelve (12) Central and West Africa French speaking countries to deliberate on how to curb emerging violent extremism and promote a culture of peace and reconciliation for development (See Maroua Report), it was decided that PROCMURA should intensify its activities in that country since it neighbours in north eastern Nigeria were facing an upsurge of Boko Haram activities. As a result of that decision, PROCMURA, in August 2013 held a Christian and Muslim religious conference in Douala the commercial capital of Cameroon. At that conference, it was resolved that a national conference needs to be held and that the venue should be Garoua, north Cameroon.



*Rev. Robert Goyek*

Having raised the resources for the conference, the Central Office of PROCMURA set in motion a process by which a Christian and Muslim religious leaders' conference will be held in Garoua. The Chairperson of the PROCMURA Area Committee for Cameroon, Rev. Robert Goyek who is also the President of the Council of Protestant Churches of Cameroon (CPCC), and President of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren of Cameroon (CLBC) set up a five-person committee to plan the conference. Their mandate as outlined by the PROCMURA Central Office in conjunction with its Area Committee in Cameroon, was to organise a "National Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders Conference on Conflict Prevention for Peace and Development in Cameroon" and

ensure that there are representatives of Christian and Muslim religious leaders from Chad and the Central African Republic.

This briefing recounts the dilemmas, the encouragement and the satisfaction of a process that was nearly jeopardised by radicalisation and violent extremism.

## 2. To go or not to go when innocence kill the innocent.

On Wednesday, 22nd July 2015 when all was set for us from the Central office to make the journey to Cameroon, news filtered in that in the central market of Maroua in the Far North region of Cameroon, two young girls whose ages were reported to range between nine (9) and fourteen (14) posed as beggars and blew themselves and others up in two separate but simultaneous suicide bomb attacks.

Surely, girls of that age cannot by their own volition fear to live and rather prefer to kill others and themselves. ‘Who owned the explosives and who loaded them with it?’ our emergency staff meeting queried. The truth of the matter is that those who ‘sentenced’ the girls to their untimely death live on while the girls and their victims numbering over twenty (20) died and others numbering over fifty (50) maimed – some for life. In our view, the innocence of the girls was exploited to kill the innocent and themselves.

## 2.1 The decision to go

After intensive and extensive consultations at the Central Office, with Rev. Goyek and his team who also consulted the governor of the northern region of Cameroon, it was decided that we had to come and that we as well as participants to the conference would be provided maximum protection. We were reminded that peace is not something that one can wish for and have it but that which one has to work for and even risk for.

## 3. The cry of “We Want Peace” echoed loudly



A member of the Youth Dynamics Group (DMJ) making a presentation on “La Caravane Artistique NON A LA TERREUR ” campaign



Members of the Youth Dynamics Group with Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah

In the life and work of PROCMURA, the cry for peace has never been louder and demonstrative as it was, when we embarked on the journey to Garoua. On planning for the Garoua trip, we had also planned an awareness raising workshop for Christian youth to take place from 24 – 27 July 2015 in Yaoundé, with the objective of taking them through the role they (as youth) should play in advocating and living by PROCMURA’s principles of Christian witness and constructive relations with Muslim youth for peace and peaceful co-existence.



When we arrived there on the evening on of 24th July, all was set and the youth were ready. They came in their numbers on 25th July with a special youth group committed to work for peace in Cameroon. They came with a message for us to send to the national Christian and Muslim religious leaders' conference. The message was candid and straight forward "We want Peace". It was transcribed on the T shirts that they wore with elaborated messages put on various display stands.



*Liberian women calling for end of civil war*

The message of the youth was reminiscent of the Women Peace Movement of Liberia who under the leadership of the Liberia Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Leymah Roberta Gbowee embarked on a high profile demonstration against the Liberia Civil War, crying loudly "We want Peace, We are Tired of War." The powerful nature of the demonstration and its contribution to end the Liberia Civil War received worldwide attention.

In fact at the Swedish "Världens fest" (Feast of the World) that took place in Karlstad in May 2014 the cry of "We want Peace" by the women of Liberia was enacted by the women of Church of Sweden to demonstrate the importance of a united cry for peace beyond borders. PROCMURA feels



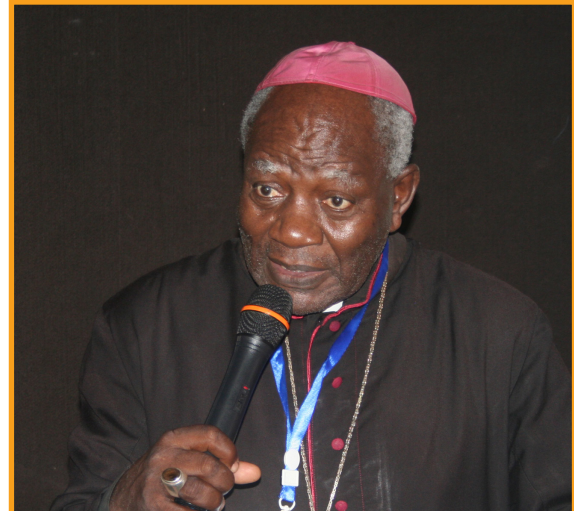
*Women in Sweden calling for Peace during the Världens fest*

very strongly that in an era of growing radicalisation and extremism of which religion has been heavily implicated, Christian and Muslim leaders, Women, and youth should come out in concert and yell/ cry for peace and eradication of violent extremism. We will need to be reminded that the

forces of evil will continue to thrive if the forces of good are dormant and inactive – we have to act more and now.

### 3. Further suicide bombing and the will to continue in the journey of peace.

On the evening of 26th July, when we had concluded the youth conference and were in high spirits to travel on the morning of 27th July to Garoua we were shocked when our dinner was interrupted by a phone call that another female Suicide bomber had just blown herself and 14 others up at a dinner resort in Maroua. This time round it was in an area where people meet in the evenings to have dinner and enjoy themselves. This could easily have been us since we were at the time at a restaurant to have our evening meal. We hardly enjoyed our dinner!



*Archbishop Antoine Ntalou of the Garoua Diocese*

Our boosted morale from the youth conference had made us more determined than ever, to go to Garoua. In fact the question never arose at all on what should be done - the dice was cast and we had no option but to cross the river at any cost.

Our concern was whether our flight will be cancelled and whether participants who committed themselves to come for the conference will still go ahead and do so, or be scared to go to that region. Thanks be to God that the flight was not cancelled and participants came as expected. Christian and Muslim religious leaders, from all the regions of Cameroon and a number of traditional rulers (Lamidos) came. We were deeply encouraged that leaders from neighbouring Maroua where the suicide bombers struck came in their numbers. The Chadian and Central African Republic participants braved it to come as well.



*Imam Djafarou of the Garoua Grand Mosque*



*One of the lamidos present making his contribution*

#### 4. The President of Nigeria jets in to discuss security as the conference opens.



*H.E Paul Biya (left) welcomes H.E. Muhammad Buhari (right) upon his arrival*

As all was set for the Governor of the North to address the conference and officially open its proceedings, a message came through that the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammad Buhari was flying into Cameroon to hold bilateral talks with the President of the Republic of Cameroon Mr. Paul Biya on the growing radicalisation and violent extremism in the two countries and the entire region. The Governor of the North and Far North whose territories are bordering north eastern Nigeria

where Boko Haram is active, were summoned to Yaoundé to be part of the meeting. In spite of the absence of the Governor, a colourful but sombre and reflective opening ceremony did take place presided over by the Secretary General of the governor, amid tight security.

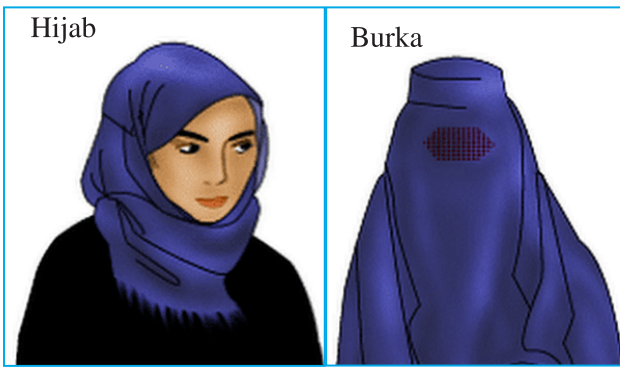
#### 5. The Proceedings Encounter an emotional moment



*A cross-section of religious leaders follow keenly the conference proceedings*

The sessions and deliberations were very constructive, informative, frank and transparent. No defensive mechanisms were displayed and no blame game improvised. None adopted a moral high ground attitude and no finger-pointing was exhibited. Collective responsibility was highlighted and a feeling that none can do it alone was clear. A feeling that both Christians and Muslims can only succeed in dealing with radicalism and violent extremism by working together and not in isolation of each other was also clear. Complacency was absent because reality had dawned and none could easily dismiss it as a phantom.

## 5.1 To wear Burka or Hijab or none of the two



This briefing cannot be complete without a mention of an emotional moment during the meeting. As my translator continued to keep me abreast with the discussions which were all carried out in French, I noticed a lady struggling in a distressful manner and wanting to raise her hand to say something but unsure of what to do. I raised my hand and the chairperson of the session said “Let us listen to the

General Adviser”. I took the microphone and said to the religious leaders that there is a lady who must speak first before me.

I went to her and said ‘Madam my sister get up and speak out your mind.’ I then helped to raise her up



because she was sobbing uncontrollably. She spoke very strongly on what the female suicide bombers had done to them (Muslim women). She recounted the ordeal she had to go through on her way to the conference when she had to be bodily searched even though she does not wear a Burka but a Hijab. “I was violated because of living up to the tenets of my religion. Why did those girls do what they did? Why should I suffer such disgrace at this my age just because girls have misused the dress of my religion

*“I was violated because of living up to the tenets of my religion”*  
to hide their evil intentions?”

The outburst of the lady brought the meeting to a moment of silence. The first to react after the silence was the Chadian Muslim delegate. He explained that their government was the first to ban the wearing of Burka because of its use as a cover up for suicide bombing. “We the Muslim community did not protest because it is a security issue and we all want to have security. Extraordinary situations necessitated extraordinary actions” he concluded. He went further to assure everyone that if they (the people of Chad) succeed in dealing with insecurity, women will be allowed to wear whatever is acceptable to them in Islam.

The Cameroonian Muslim leaders explained that they are determined to work hard to ensure the Burka or hijab ban is not extended to Cameroon by working hard to counter violent extremism which innocent girls are lured into committing. Until they did that a leader of the Muslim community explained, the security persons will have to continue to do their duties but ensure that only women searched fellow women.

The last word from the lady was “When will life be normal again?” After the query, she sat down very despondent but controlled.

## 6. Dinner and the winding road back to Nairobi



*An evening dinner at the Garoua Grand Mosque*

On the eve of our departure from Garoua the imam of Garoua invited a selected number of us to have supper with him at his home. It was during the feasting that a message filtered through that our flight was cancelled and there was no other plane coming to Garoua to take us to Yaoundé to enplane to Nairobi. The news created an amount of confusion as we were unsure about what to do. Several enquiries revealed that we could make a four hour trip to N’Gaoundéré in

the Adamawa state of Cameroon and catch a flight to Ndjamena, Chad, and then to Yaoundé. After settling for this option, no one dared sleep comfortably because the hired bus was to leave at 3.00am otherwise we will miss the plane. We managed to get everyone awake except one who over slept and could not hear the violent knock on his door. How he managed it to Yaoundé we do not yet know.

In Yaoundé, we had a pleasant surprise when we were informed that Joy’s luggage had finally arrived and she could now take it back to Nairobi. Joy, it needs to be said, arrived in Yaoundé only to be told that her suitcase could not get into the plane. She had to buy everything from toothbrush to shoes in Yaoundé before emplaning to Garoua. Anyway she brought the suitcase back to Nairobi – it managed to be loaded into the plane this time round.

### Conclusion

This briefing like any other briefing is not meant to say it all. It is meant to say enough so that we may appreciate that the road to peace cannot be straight forward; it in fact cannot be peaceful as there is also a risk to take. The satisfaction of plying that road is not when you succeed immediately, but rather when you refuse to give up in spite of many obstacles. It is when one recognises that there is no alternative to peace and that peace itself is the alternative that the journey even when tough have the tough keep going.

We are able to stop here with the understanding that you will continue to accompany us when PROCMURAs next destination in its peace journey is Lomé, Togo next week –specifically 24 –28 August. At this conference we will bring together Christian and Muslim religious leaders from Ghana, Nigeria, the Republic of Benin, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Gambia to talk peace and live peace. It will be an educative conference indeed.

May God who entrusted to us this ministry of peace and reconciliation continue to guide and guard



us as we seek to fulfil what is required of us in this vocation.

**Johnson Mbillah**

**General Adviser**

On behalf of the PROCMURA team



*Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah making his keynote address*



*Ms Joy Wandabwa presenting the Maroua Report to the Governor's representative during the opening ceremony*



*Ms. Joy Wandabwa giving a vote of thanks*



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