

## A Lawyer

B.N.

In November 2004, I received a request from a colleague to come to the aid of a French citizen living in Cameroon who was being prosecuted by the Police Commissioner of the DGRE, the Cameroon Bureau of Investigation.

I agreed to help and we met with him. He explained to us that he had recently ended a relationship with a woman who, in retaliation, had contacted all of the police departments in Douala as well as the DGRE. The DGRE Commissioner had then called the man and asked him to appear at the police station with two million Francs (approximately \$4,000).

My colleague and I agreed to accompany him to the police station. We could not represent him because our rules of criminal procedure do not allow a lawyer to assist someone under direct investigation. But we were at his side to ensure that the DGRE office was actually located at the indicated police station; and that it was actually the Police Commissioner who had called him.

Once at the station, we introduced ourselves and explained why we were there. The Commissioner responded by shouting that we had no right to be there and that, in his capacity as police chief, he had “the right to kill” those present in his office.

The Commissioner ordered his officers to throw us out. We soon found ourselves in the courtyard of a public school, near the police station. I tried to contact the office of the President of the Bar in Douala to inform him of this incident, but the Commissioner ripped my cell phone from my hand, punched me in the face, pushed me into a bush and then left the premises.

Shocked, my colleague called another associate to help us. He arrived thirty minutes later accompanied by other lawyers, who filled the lobby of the DGRE office—the protest had begun. Two hours later, the Attorney General, representing the Bar, arrived to meet with the protesters. He not only approved of the Commissioner’s behavior, but also indicated that he would prevent the protesters’ access to the courtroom where they had gathered to coordinate the protest.

The lawyers decided to strike and refrain from appearing before the appeals court of Douala. The strike quickly extended to lawyers throughout the country. The goal of the strike was to convince the President to sanction and to remove the Police Commissioner; to remove the Attorney General of Douala; and to pass a new code of criminal procedure granting the accused the right to counsel from the inception of police interrogation.

For several weeks, the judicial system was paralyzed by the strike.

The media and citizens of Cameroon were very supportive of our position. Abusive police behavior had become a daily event, and the people were suffering. I drafted a complaint against the Commissioner. However, both the Minister of Justice and the President of the Bar supported the Commissioner and did not want the matter brought to trial. But the lawyers refused to give up and they focused their attention on my complaint.

At the same time, the President of Cameroon was informed of the situation. Through a delegate, he informed me of the measures he had taken against the Commissioner and his personal commitment to strongly support the adoption of a new code of criminal procedure in the upcoming session of Congress. He also assured me that he wanted to work with us to reestablish order and to return to a normal administration of justice.

I faced a dilemma. Should I believe these pledges of reform, and withdraw my complaint? Or should I continue to support my colleagues in the fight, which was leaning toward rebellion?

I decided to seek the answer in prayer and resolved to withdraw my complaint.

I wanted to believe that the President's promises were sincere and to forgive the Commissioner. But I was frightened because I knew this decision would be met with great hostility from my colleagues and those who wanted the current political system to fail.

I met with the President's delegate and he confirmed that the President was personally committed to changing the code of criminal procedure. I made it clear that the new code was the essential goal of our protest and that I considered the Commissioner to be merely the catalyst for the protest, and not my personal enemy. Therefore, I asked that he be only moderately sanctioned.

Relying on the President's commitment, the next day, I withdrew my complaint.

Once the media and my fellow lawyers were informed, they began a libel campaign against me. Everyone thought that I had been corrupted by the officials so that the suggested reforms would fail.

A few months later, the government enacted the new code of criminal procedure including the agreed-upon terms, and also adopted the long-awaited professional rules for lawyers.

Beyond receiving the moral satisfaction that I had fulfilled my duty, this experience taught me that forgiveness is essential in the criminal field, perhaps more than any other. I profoundly believe that fraternity can permeate this field through the path of cooperation, integrity and forgiveness.