

By Asong Ndifor

One of Cameroon's busiest highways is the smooth 74-kilometer stretch from Douala, the hub of economic activities, to Limbe, home of the country's lone petroleum refinery. Every day a stream of drivers and passengers encounter several police and gendarmes checkpoints.

The official purpose of the men in uniform is to examine vehicle documents, fight highway crimes and inspect automobile conditions to ensure road safety. But in practice, the roadblocks are there to extort money from people.

The size of the payola depends on the gravity of the "offense," which could include missing personal identification papers, a missing business permit or no receipt for having paid customs duties, even if the goods in question are bought locally.

For commercial vehicle drivers, it is customary to pay 500 francs (US\$1) to police and 1,000 francs (US\$2) to gendarmes. Both security forces perform virtually the same duties, but gendarmes are considered the elite force.

With the transportation of goods, police often demand bribes for trumped-up offenses, such as overloading or suspected stolen or smuggled goods. The cost of these bribes is passed on to impoverished consumers in a vicious circle of soaring prices.

Off-Road Corruption

These shameful practices are not exclusive to the Douala-Limbe highway. On bumpy rural roads, the experience is even more appalling. Cabs, called clandos (clandestine), registered to carry five passengers will squeeze in eight riders at a time. The drivers of these jalopies are aware of the dangers of this practice, but they are compelled to take the risk in order to make extra money to cover checkpoint bribes.

Satisfied with collecting bribes, the police and gendarmes do not bother with the dangerous conditions of vehicles, despite the alarming rate of road accidents. To top it off, many of the vehicles are not insured or licensed.

Police corruption, an open secret, does not end on the road. There have been cases of wealthy patrons who settle scores by bribing police officers to fake offenses and detain adversaries.

Some analysts say widespread corruption in Cameroon, especially corruption regarding the treasury, taxation, state enterprises, the judiciary, education, the media, elections and the awarding of contracts, exists because the police — the very body that should be investigating and prosecuting suspects — are conspicuously corrupt.

Self-Image in the “Most Corrupt” Country

For two consecutive years, in 1998 and 1999, Cameroon was ranked by Transparency International at the bottom of their Corruption Perception Index, based on an aggregation of public opinion surveys. On the street, this finding serves as proof that Cameroon is the “most corrupt” country in the world.

A 2006 editorial in *The Nation* magazine described what is obvious to Cameroonians: The culprits “are in nearly every sector. By the magnitude of their mansions, expensive automobiles and posh lifestyles, despite their peanut salaries, you know them.”

The media has been awash with lists of government officials who have become overnight millionaires. Most enjoy immunity. Even when culpable, these officials cannot be arrested unless they are fired by the president, who appointed them.

With sustained pressure from the media, diplomats and local whistleblowers, President Paul Biya uses every opportunity to denounce the vice. One of his most well-received condemnations was a televised 2006 New Year speech. He banged the table in a fury reproaching the “scandalous, illicit enrichment by a few.”

His open attacks on corruption have been bolstered with the creation of:

The National Agency for the Investigation of Financial Crimes, which combats money laundering, corruption and embezzlement;

The National Anti-corruption Commission, which is charged with monitoring and evaluating the effective implementation of the government’s anti-corruption fight;

The National Governance Program, which monitors accountability in governance;

The audit bench of the Supreme Court, which is responsible for investigating cases of corruption and

embezzlement;

Tender boards in all ministries and corporations to ensure transparency in the awarding of public contracts above five million francs (US\$10,400).

Despite these measures, the battle against corruption is far from victorious.

“Corruption, which is a virus, continues to wreak havoc, exacerbating scorching misery amongst Cameroonians, which for me is more devastating than the HIV/AIDS monster,” Ntumfor Nico Halle, an international legal consultant, said in a speech. He was speaking at The Nation magazine Transparency Awards dinner in March 2008.

But the government disagrees. Briefing me on the anti-corruption fight, a source at the presidency says the “ongoing arrest and imprisonment of senior state officials illustrates the success of measures taken by President Biya to fight corruption.” He revealed that the government has even contacted the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation to help investigate the assets of Cameroonian civil-servant millionaires.

Recent results of corruption and embezzlement investigations include the detention of Abah Abah Polycap, ex-Finance Minister; Urbain Olanuena, former Minister of Health; Zaccheus Forjindam, the fired general manager of Cameroon Shipyard and Industrial Engineering Limited; and Atangana Mebara, the dismissed secretary general who, while on the job, wielded power that was only second to the head-of-state’s.

Those recently punished include former general managers of the Special Council Support Fund for Local Authorities (FEICOM — Fonds Special d’Equipment et d’Intervention Intercommunal), the Douala Ports Authority, the Cameroon Housing Corporation (SIC — Société Immobilière du Cameroun), and the Cameroon Real Estate Fund (CFC — Crédit Foncier du Cameroun). They were jailed, along with some 25 accomplices, for terms ranging from 10 to 35 years; their confiscated assets and fines totaled some 42 billion francs (US\$87 million).

Penalties for corrupt police have been comparatively lenient. Recently, eight police officials were merely suspended when found guilty of “aggravated corruption.”

The battle continues under the aegis of Operation Sparrow Hawk, a government anti-corruption campaign. Among those exposed by the media were Marafa Hamidou Yaya, minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization; House Speaker Cavaye Djibril, who is suspected of corruption; and Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni. Their names, with the exception of Inoni's, were featured on a list of 64 public service millionaires first published in February 2006.

Members of the National Assembly are often criticized for the unaccountable use of their 8 million-franc (US\$17,000) annual allowance, allocated to finance micro projects in their constituencies.

Greasing the Wheels of Injustice

The judiciary is not free from corruption, either. In 2008, three magistrates faced charges at the Higher Judicial Council — the body that promotes, appoints and sanctions magistrates. The Cameroonian president heads the Council, a position critics say puts the judiciary at his beck and call.

Elections also are under scrutiny. Observers say many corrupt personalities use ill-gotten money to deprive Cameroonians of freely choosing their leaders. The National Elections Observatory notes that the elite “get involved in influence peddling, corruption and all kinds of manipulations during election campaigns.”

At a press conference in Yaounde in June 2007, Peter Eigen, president of Transparency International, observed: “We have come to realize that too much rhetoric around the arrest of a few state authorities is more of a political ploy, and this is significantly dangerous. Corruption greases the wheels of injustice over time, leading to abuse of political systems.”

Declaration of Assets

Public commentators agree that if the president wants to get serious about fighting corruption, he should implement the Law on the Declaration of Assets.

This provision was enshrined in Article 66 of the 1996 constitution, but it took 10 years for President Biya to send a bill to parliament and it was only enacted in April 2006. The law requires top state functionaries, including the president, to declare their assets upon taking office and upon leaving.

Today, an application to make the law operational has not been decreed by Biya. That delay leaves the impression that the political will to effectively fight corruption does not exist.

The problem is well summarized in the words of Akame Mfoumou, a former finance minister. He pointed out that vice is so pervasive that “when you block the door on corruption, it jumps in through the window.”