

“No Babies Behind Bars” Campaign: Phase 2

For the immediate release of the mothers detained with their babies and of the two little girls held at the Bamenda Central Prison for 365 days

LAETISIA AND SERA: 365 DAYS behind bars

INFORMATION NOTE AND URGENT APPEAL

The organisation AWT — All Women Together, in collaboration with its partners Nouveaux Droits de l'Homme (NDH), Mandela Center International, Conscience Africaine, New Human Rights USA, Positive Génération, “Les Amis du Droit” and others, today launches Phase 2 of an urgent international campaign for the release of the women unjustly detained with their babies, and of two (02) innocent little girls, currently held within the prison environment of the Bamenda Central Prison, North-West Region, Cameroon, for 365 days.

Why the No Babies Behind Bars Coalition demands their immediate release, together with that of their mothers, Jocelyn NDUM and Blanche Yocnteh

Douala, July 2026

One year behind bars: when two babies become invisible to the justice system

On 24 June 2026, Laetisia and Sera marked their first birthday behind the bars of the Bamenda Central Prison. In crossing the symbolic threshold of three hundred and sixty-five days spent in detention, these two infants have become the face of a question that should never arise in a State committed to the protection of children's rights.

Arrested on 24 June 2025 in Bamessing, in the Ngoketunjia Division, together with their mothers, **Jocelyn NDUM**, aged 23, and **Blanche Yocnteh**, aged 23, the two infants have spent the entirety of their first year of life in a penitentiary facility. Throughout this period, they have shared the daily reality of prison life without ever having been prosecuted for any offence, without being the subject of any judicial decision of their own, and without appearing in the procedural documents as persons concerned by the proceedings instituted before the Bamenda Military Tribunal.

This reality goes far beyond the confines of a single court case. It calls into question the capacity of public institutions to guarantee the fundamental rights of children when they suffer, without being their intended targets, the consequences of criminal proceedings directed against their parents. Above all, it raises an essential question: can an infant spend an entire year in prison when no court has ever ordered his or her deprivation of liberty?

It is to answer this question that several Cameroonian civil society organisations, under the leadership of **All Women Together**, Conscience Africaine and Mandela Center International, launched the **No Babies Behind Bars** campaign. For one year, this Coalition has followed the case closely, in a spirit of institutional dialogue, respect for the independence of the judiciary, and the search for solutions consistent with Cameroon's international commitments. During this first year, its action focused on observing the judicial proceedings, documenting the facts, engaging with the competent authorities, and preparing an in-depth legal analysis that led to the drafting of Special Report No. 1.

The crossing of the **365-day** threshold nevertheless marks a turning point. After a year devoted to understanding, documenting and dialogue, the Coalition now considers it its responsibility to bring this matter publicly before all national institutions as well as before Cameroon's African and international partners. This new stage does not reflect a change of objective, but an evolution in advocacy strategy. It rests on a simple conviction: the protection

of children cannot await the final outcome of criminal proceedings when their fundamental rights are being continuously affected.

The Coalition wishes to recall that this note does not purport to substitute itself for the courts called upon to assess the facts, nor to determine the criminal responsibility of the adults concerned. Its purpose is different. It seeks to draw attention to the specific situation of two infants whose rights exist independently of those of their mothers, and who remain fully protected under Cameroonian law, African law and international law.

Over recent months, this case has gradually ceased to be a mere judicial proceeding and has become a genuine matter of public policy. It brings to light a reality that remains insufficiently addressed: that of children affected by the detention of their parents. The two infants of Bamenda are most likely not the only children facing this situation. They are, today, its most visible and most emblematic face.

This document therefore inaugurates the **second phase of the No Babies Behind Bars campaign**. It accompanies the forthcoming publication of **Special Report No. 1** and marks the transition from an approach essentially based on observation to structured institutional advocacy. It is addressed to the Cameroonian authorities, African institutions, United Nations mechanisms, technical and financial partners, and all actors engaged in the promotion of children's rights.

Through this note, the Coalition is not requesting a favour. It recalls that the protection of children constitutes a legal obligation freely accepted by Cameroon through the international and regional conventions it has ratified. It is in the light of these commitments that the situation of Laetisia, Sera, Jocelyn NDUM and Blanche Yocnteh must now be assessed.

Judicial proceedings that have evolved significantly

Since the arrests of 24 June 2025, the judicial proceedings have undergone several developments which now make it possible to better assess the situation of the two young mothers and that of their infants. The Coalition has followed each of these stages with the conviction that credible advocacy must first rest on a precise knowledge of the facts and on respect for the normal course of justice.

After several months of judicial investigation, the military investigating judge issued, on **18 March 2026**, an **order of partial dismissal and committal for trial** before the Bamenda Military Tribunal. This decision constitutes an important stage in the proceedings, as it specifies the persons committed for trial, the facts ultimately retained against them, and the criminal charges that will be the subject of the hearings before the Tribunal.

A careful analysis of this order reveals a first essential element: the infants Laetisia and Sera do not appear in it at any point. They are not mentioned in any procedural capacity, are not concerned by any prosecution, and are not the subject of any judicial decision of their own. This absence confirms that the criminal proceedings concern exclusively the adults committed for trial before the military court. Yet, at the very moment this order was issued, the two children continued to live in detention with their mothers, as if their presence in prison were a matter of course.

The first public hearing, held on 18 June 2026 before the Bamenda Military Tribunal, confirmed this reality. The proceedings dealt exclusively with the persons being prosecuted. The charges were read out, the defendants were heard, and the prosecution, being unable to present its witnesses, requested an adjournment of the case, which was set for **23 July 2026**. At no point were the two infants the subject of any specific discussion, particular measure or autonomous decision.

For the Coalition, this hearing nevertheless marks an important turning point. It sheds light on the exact nature of the facts alleged against the two young mothers, **Jocelyn NDUM** and **Blanche Yocnteh**, now aged twenty-

three. The exchanges before the Tribunal show that the proceedings have progressively refocused on offences whose assessment requires a rigorous analysis of the circumstances of the case. They also reveal that the accusations initially perceived as particularly serious must now be assessed in the light of the elements actually retained in the committal order.

The Coalition notes in particular that the issues relating to **failure to report (non-denunciation)** and to the **national identity card** must be examined within the specific context of the armed conflict that has affected the North-West and South-West Regions for several years. In certain localities, possession of an official document may expose civilians to serious risks of reprisals from armed groups, while its absence may cause difficulties during checks carried out by the security forces. This reality in no way prejudices the sovereign assessment of the facts by the Tribunal. It simply serves as a reminder that the conduct alleged against the accused cannot be analysed independently of the exceptional context in which it occurred.

Beyond these considerations, the Coalition considers that the developments in the proceedings reinforce one self-evident truth: *the situation of the two infants can no longer be regarded as a mere consequence of their mothers' pre-trial detention*. The further the proceedings advance, the clearer it becomes that Laetisia and Sera remain the only persons deprived of liberty without any procedural status of their own. They are neither defendants, nor accused, nor convicted. Yet they are the only ones to have spent the entirety of their first year of life in a penitentiary facility.

It is precisely this contradiction that leads the Coalition today to strengthen its advocacy. Without seeking to influence the outcome of the trial, it considers that the developments since the first hearing justify an immediate re-examination of the situation of the two young mothers, in the best interests of their children. Indeed, the rights of Laetisia and Sera cannot be fully protected as long as their mothers remain deprived of liberty under conditions that prevent these infants from growing up in an environment consistent with their fundamental needs.

After a year of monitoring, the Coalition thus considers that the Bamenda case has entered a new phase. It is no longer merely a matter of documenting a troubling situation; it is now a matter of examining, in the light of the developments in the proceedings and of Cameroon's international commitments, what legal and institutional responses must be provided to put an end to a situation that has become humanly and legally untenable.

A situation incompatible with Cameroon's international commitments

Over recent months, the situation of **Laetisia** and **Sera** has gradually ceased to be a mere humanitarian concern and has become a genuine issue of international human rights law. The analyses conducted by the Coalition in preparing **Special Report No. 1** show that this case must now be assessed in the light of the international commitments freely undertaken by Cameroon in the field of child protection.

1. By ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Cameroon undertook to make the best interests of the child a primary consideration in any decision likely to affect a child. This principle, enshrined in Article 3 of the Convention, is not a mere policy guideline. It is a genuine legal obligation binding on all public authorities, whether judicial, administrative, penitentiary or social. Any measure whose effect is to keep an infant in an environment of deprivation of liberty must therefore be subject to a specific assessment demonstrating that it truly constitutes the solution most consistent with the child's best interests.
2. The Convention also recognises, in Article 6, the inherent right of every child to life, survival and development. The first twelve months of life represent a decisive period for a child's physical, neurological, psychological and emotional development. The prolonged confinement of an infant in a prison environment inevitably raises questions as to the conditions under which this right to development is effectively guaranteed.

3. Article 24 of the Convention further recalls that every child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health and to the medical services necessary for his or her development. This provision does not concern curative care alone. It also encompasses the environment in which the child grows up, his or her nutrition, emotional stability, social interactions, and all the conditions necessary for harmonious development.
4. More significantly still, Article 37 of the Convention sets out a fundamental principle: no child shall be deprived of liberty arbitrarily, and any deprivation of liberty must be a measure of last resort, limited to the shortest appropriate period of time. In the present case, Laetisia and Sera are not being prosecuted for any offence. They are not the subject of any placement decision, any specific judicial order, or any judicial review of their own situation. Yet they have been living in a penitentiary facility for more than a year. In the Coalition's view, this reality calls for an in-depth legal reflection on the scope of the guarantees recognised by the Convention.
5. The same requirements flow from the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, to which Cameroon is also a party. Its Article 4 makes the best interests of the child the guiding principle in any decision concerning the child. Its Articles 5 and 11 enshrine the child's right to development, education and fulfilment, while its Article 30 calls on States to give special attention to children whose mothers are deprived of liberty. For the Coalition, this provision is of particular importance in the present case, since it expressly recognises that the detention of a mother imposes specific protection obligations towards her child.
6. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights further strengthens this protection. Its Article 9 guarantees to every person the right to liberty and security, while its Article 24 recognises the right of every child to the measures of protection required by his or her status as a minor. These guarantees cannot be suspended solely because the child's parents are the subject of criminal proceedings.
7. To these treaty instruments must be added the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders, better known as the Bangkok Rules. These Rules recommend that judicial authorities give particular attention to pregnant women and mothers of young children, and consider, whenever possible, alternatives to detention in order to limit the consequences of incarceration on children. Without calling into question the requirements of criminal justice, these Rules recall that decisions concerning detention must take into account the particular situation of children who depend directly on their mothers.
8. Finally, the Nelson Mandela Rules, which constitute the universal reference standard for the treatment of persons deprived of liberty, recall that human dignity remains at the heart of all prison administration. While these Rules primarily concern detained persons, they also recall that prison administrations bear the responsibility of preventing any situation likely to infringe the fundamental rights of persons present in detention facilities, including where those persons are infants.

Taken together, these instruments form a coherent legal framework. They remind everyone that a child remains the holder of rights of his or her own, independent of those of his or her parents, and that public authorities are required to take all necessary measures to ensure their effective protection.

It is precisely in the light of these commitments that the **No Babies Behind Bars Coalition** considers that the situation of **Laetisia** and **Sera** now calls for an urgent response from the competent authorities.

After an entire year spent in a prison environment, the question is no longer merely how to reconcile the judicial proceedings with the presence of two infants in prison. It is now to determine whether the continuation of this situation remains compatible with the international obligations to which Cameroon has freely subscribed.

Phase II of the campaign: the time for reforms and commitments

The crossing of the **365-day** threshold marks a decisive turning point in the **No Babies Behind Bars** campaign. For a year, the Coalition gave priority to institutional dialogue, independent observation of the judicial proceedings, documentation of the facts and legal research. This first phase made it possible to better understand the circumstances of the case, to follow its progress before the competent courts, and to produce Special Report No. 1, which now constitutes the campaign's reference document.

The analyses developed in this report lead to a clear conclusion: the situation of **Laetisia** and **Sera** is not merely a humanitarian concern. It raises a fundamental issue of child rights protection and calls into question the capacity of institutions to guarantee the effectiveness of Cameroon's international commitments when an infant suffers the consequences of criminal proceedings directed against his or her mother. This case also reveals a broader institutional gap: the absence of clearly identified mechanisms to ensure the protection of children affected by the detention of their parents.

The Coalition considers that this situation can no longer be regarded as an inevitable consequence of the detention of adults. Children's rights are neither incidental nor secondary. They are autonomous and call for a specific response from the State. The protection of the best interests of the child cannot be deferred until the final outcome of judicial proceedings when the development, health and dignity of very young children are directly at stake.

This is why the Coalition officially opens the second phase of the No Babies Behind Bars campaign. This new stage will be devoted to national and international advocacy, dialogue with public institutions, the dissemination of the findings of **Special Report No. 1**, and the promotion of reforms designed to strengthen, on a lasting basis, the protection of children affected by the detention of their parents.

While other children are learning to walk, discovering their surroundings or celebrating their first birthday with their families, Laetisia and Sera have spent their first twelve months within the walls of a penitentiary facility. Their story reminds us that the consequences of detention can sometimes reach those who have committed no fault and who nevertheless remain the most vulnerable.

In view of the developments in the judicial proceedings, the conclusions of Special Report No. 1 and the international obligations freely accepted by Cameroon, All Women Together and the No Babies Behind Bars Coalition set out the following demands:

1. The Coalition demands the immediate release of the infants Laetisia and Sera, who are not being prosecuted for any offence, are not the subject of any judicial decision of their own, and whose prolonged confinement in a prison environment is incompatible with the principle of the best interests of the child enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.
2. The Coalition requests the release of Jocelyn NDUM and Blanche Yocnteh, in view of the evolution of the proceedings, the elements retained in the committal order, the exchanges during the first hearing of 18 June 2026, and the need to safeguard the fundamental rights of their infants. This request is made with full respect for the independence of the competent courts and without prejudging their final decision on the merits of the case.

3. The Coalition demands that the Cameroonian authorities fully implement Cameroon's international commitments, in particular those arising from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Bangkok Rules and the Nelson Mandela Rules, so that the rights of children affected by detention are effectively protected.
4. The Coalition calls on the Government to initiate, in consultation with the institutions concerned, the Cameroon Human Rights Commission, civil society organisations and international partners, a national reflection aimed at establishing permanent mechanisms for the identification, support and protection of children affected by the detention of their parents. Such a reform would prevent the recurrence of comparable situations and would help bring national practices into closer conformity with Cameroon's international commitments.

The Coalition is convinced that the case of **Laetisia** and **Sera** can become a founding moment for the protection of children's rights in Cameroon. The objective of this campaign is not solely to put an end to one particular situation; it is also to contribute to the emergence of case law, administrative practices and public policies that will guarantee that no child is, in future, deprived of the protection afforded by national law, African law and international law.

Through this note, the Coalition finally reaffirms its readiness to pursue a constructive dialogue with the Cameroonian authorities, African institutions, United Nations mechanisms, technical and financial partners, and all actors committed to the promotion of human rights. It remains convinced that the protection of the most vulnerable children is not only a legal requirement; it is also a moral imperative and a collective responsibility for any society committed to justice, human dignity and the rule of law.

Done at Douala, Cameroon, on 3 July 2026

For the Coordination of the **No Babies Behind Bars Coalition**



Winnie Mandela KAMGA
Campaign Coordinator
Executive Secretary
All Women Together (AWT)

Allwomentogether@yahoo.fr

On behalf of the member organisations of the Coalition