

January 20, 2021

President Joseph Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Secretary of the Department of Homeland  
Security  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
3801 Nebraska Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 2001

Dear President Biden and Incoming Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security,

On behalf of the 135 undersigned faith-based organizations and faith leaders from across traditions, we call for an immediate 18-month designation for Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Cameroon to protect as many lives as possible from a devastating humanitarian crisis and ongoing socio-political conflict. Our call is rooted in our country's interfaith values of welcome, hospitality, and generous aid to those who call on protection from persecution or are otherwise unable to return to their homeland due to unsafe conditions. Designating DED or TPS for this group could provide a lifeline for Cameroonians who face immediate security threats in their homeland. To add to the unbelievable pressure faced by Cameroonians back home, several alarming high-profile incidents involving the treatment of Cameroonians in U.S. detention have raised grave concerns about abuse, torture, and coercion in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody.<sup>1</sup> These incidents belie our calling to treat every human being with dignity and respect.

Cameroon is embroiled in a devastating socio-political conflict and humanitarian crisis that have created extraordinary and temporary conditions so extreme as to warrant TPS or DED designation. Since the beginning of 2020, the security and human rights situation in Cameroon has greatly deteriorated. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 670,000 people have been internally displaced and approximately 58,000 people are now refugees.<sup>2</sup> The sociopolitical crisis that has beset Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions has steadily escalated over the years, leading to increasing reports of human rights violations and abuses, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, destruction of property, as well as rising humanitarian needs. The security situation remains particularly volatile in the Far North, due to violence carried out by the Boko-Haram group.<sup>3</sup> Since May of last year, incidences of human rights violations committed by Cameroonian military forces and separatist groups have also increased.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/22/us-ice-officers-allegedly-used-torture-to-make-africans-sign-own-deportation-orders>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unocha.org/cameroon/about>

<sup>3</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/76573.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/27/cameroon-civilians-killed-anglophone-regions>

Moreover, Cameroon has been greatly affected by a surge of over 350,000 refugees from neighboring Nigeria and the Central African Republic, overwhelming social services systems and resources in eastern Cameroon and exacerbating the existing shortages of food, water, healthcare, and housing.<sup>5</sup> Both countries have been affected by violence by nonstate actors and armed militia groups, like Boko-Haram in Nigeria and feuding religious fundamentalists groups in the Central African Republic. Thousands of people continue to flee to areas already experiencing recurrent droughts, floods, and epidemics of cholera and COVID-19. Essential infrastructure to deliver humanitarian aid and pandemic relief has been severely degraded by violence and heavy rains, which has made the dispatch of aid even more challenging.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 epidemic has only exacerbated existing health shortages. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention warns against all but essential travel to Cameroon, citing limited medical resources and a high risk of contracting the virus.<sup>7</sup> Cameroon has reported more cases and deaths than most other central African countries, with over 21,000 cases and 426 deaths as of October 30, 2020 according to the World Health Organization.<sup>8</sup>

Many Cameroonians have found their way to the U.S.-Mexico border to ask for asylum in the United States. Even so, Cameroonians have been turned away, made to wait in migrant camps along the border, and held indefinitely in detention by immigration officials, only to be denied asylum. Despite the tragic conditions that are driving Cameroonians to seek sanctuary in the U.S., hundreds of Cameroonians in ICE custody, many of them asylum seekers protected by international law, may face imminent deportation. Several alarming incidents, including the death of a Cameroonian migrant in ICE detention last year<sup>9</sup>, a hunger strike held at Pine Prairie, LA this past June<sup>10</sup>, and allegations that ICE officials used torture to make Cameroonians sign their own deportations orders<sup>11</sup>, compel us to demand accountability for these abuses. We support lawmaker's demands to halt the removal of Cameroonians until a fair, transparent investigation into these disturbing accounts is completed.<sup>12</sup>

TPS is a statutory status given to nationals of a certain country living in the United States if conditions in the country make return unsafe. The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) may designate a country for TPS if conditions in the country meet requirements regarding ongoing armed conflict, natural disasters (including epidemics), or other extraordinary and temporary conditions in the country that temporarily prevent safe return. TPS

5

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/2/5e452d2b4/cameroonian-refugees-flee-nigeria-bringing-total-arrivals-close-60000-mark.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://fr.reuters.com/article/ozatp-uk-westafrica-floods-idAFKBN26218W-OZATP>

<sup>7</sup> <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/warning/coronavirus-cameroon>

<sup>8</sup> <https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/cm>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-05/cameroon-death-ice-custody-black-immigrants-rights>

<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/09/08/the-hunger-strikers-of-pine-prairie-protesting-indefinite-detention-by-ice/>

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/22/us-ice-officers-allegedly-used-torture-to-make-africans-sign-own-deportation-orders>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/HomelandDems/status/1316104786446561288/photo/1>;

<https://twitter.com/JoaquinCastrotx/status/1316117172708691969/photo/1>

provides protection from deportation and permission to work in the United States for the duration of the designation. DED was established to provide the president with a vital tool in U.S. foreign policy and is also used to protect foreign nationals in the United States from civil, political, and humanitarian crises in their home country that make it unsafe for them to return, or whose suspension of deportation serves other United States foreign policy or domestic interests. DED provides similar protections as TPS, but DED does not require a registration process and is triggered when an individual is identified for removal. In this way, a DED designation uses minimal resources administratively and has an immediate effect for those who qualify.

It is in the interest of vulnerable, detained Cameroonians as well as U.S. policy to issue an immediate 18-month designation of DED or TPS. In recent months, the Department of State as well as Congressional officials, have called for the government in Cameroon to comply with human rights norms and laws. If we expect allies in Cameroon to heed our calls for calm and human rights, then we too, must comply with international norms, including not deporting persons to conflict zones during a global pandemic. Today, the circumstances in Cameroon are dire and deporting Cameroonians in the middle of a pandemic will exacerbate an already challenging crisis for Cameroon. It lacks the health infrastructure necessary to protect its citizens as well as continues to face deep sectarian strife. As a global leader, the U.S. should lead by example, which is why it makes sense to put in place an 18-month designation of DED or TPS for Cameroon.

Finally, it is a moral imperative to ensure that Cameroonians are given just treatment under the law and given due consideration for the conditions that prevail in their home country. In light of the ongoing armed conflict and extraordinary conditions, we pray that you will heed our call to designate TPS status or DED for Cameroonian migrants for 18-months.

All people deserve access to health and safety, not deportation to countries they initially fled because of persecution and violence. The United States must recognize the enhanced dangers and conditions faced by Black migrants and asylum seekers due to racism and take into account their particular experiences and circumstances in policies and decisions which subject the lives of the most vulnerable to overlapping forms of violence. The Quran teaches: “They love those who emigrated to them and find not any desire in their hearts of what the emigrants were given, but rather give them preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. Whoever is protected from the greediness of his own soul, then those will be successful.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the Torah commands, “You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the LORD am your God.”<sup>14</sup> As a faith community we will continue to work to minister to Cameroonians and build upon that which tethers us together: the love we have for our neighbor.

Sincerely,

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<sup>13</sup> Surat Al-Hashr 59:9.

<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 24:22.

## **Organizations**

ADL (Anti-Defamation League)

African American Ministers In Action

American Friends Service Committee

Anti-Defamation League Mountain States Region

Austin Region Justice for Our Neighbors

Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America

Binghampton United Methodist Mission

Casa de Paz

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington

Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.

Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America

Church World Service

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas

Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Faiths for Safe Water

Fellowship Southwest

Franciscan Action Network

Georgia Interfaith Public Policy Center

Haitian Bridge Alliance

Interfaith Alliance of Colorado

Interfaith Families Project

Just Neighbors

Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

National Justice for Our Neighbors

NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia

Northern Illinois Justice for Our Neighbors

Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, Society of the Sacred Heart United States  
Canada Province

Park Hill United Methodist Church, Denver

Pax Christi Dallas TX

Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Justice Team

St. Camillus Roman Catholic Church

The Episcopal Church

The Interfaith LGBTI Clergy Association

The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society

Union for Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

Wind of the Spirit Immigrant Resource Center

World Relief

## **Individuals**

Allison Paksoy

Anthony Albert

Betty Scholten

Beverly Antonio

Blake Shetler

Br. Michael Potvin-Frost

Brian Lee

Bruno Yara

Carol Coston, OP

Carol Devoss

Cheryl Greene

Chris Johnson

Chris M Bouende

Dan Esposito

Dan Grosano

Dianne Doten Morrison

Doreen Glynn

Evie Macway

Father Brian Jordan of St. Camillus Church  
in Silver Spring, Maryland

Fr. Bert Chilson

Greg Smith

Innocent Awasom

James Fine

JL Angell

John Fobanjong

John Humphrey

Joseph Pipimae

Joyce Frohn

Judith M. Engel

Judith Roberts

Karen Stickney

Kathy Bradley

Kim Perez

Laura Dravenstott

Laura Villegas

Levita Rohlman

Louis Ricou

Lystra Lloyd

Maître Len

Maria Orlandini

Mark Meeks

Merilie Robertson

Meshack Mudoh

Mirtha Ninayahuar

Nancy Grant

Nancy Hall

Nancy Kasten  
Nganya Martin Ngang  
Patricia Erickson  
Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner  
Rev Barbara Jarrell  
Rev. Alexis Kassim  
Rev. Charles Swadley  
Rev. Dana Lightsey  
Rev. Daniel R. Fickes  
Rev. David Bowerman  
Rev. Debra Loudin-McCann  
Rev. Dr. David M. Hindman  
Rev. Dr. Paul Ziese  
Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea  
Rev. Elizabeth R. Wright  
Rev. Horace Huse  
Rev. Joseph Jueng  
Rev. Joseph Keesecker  
Rev. Karen W. Berns  
Rev. Kierstin Homblette Allen  
Rev. Lora Brandis  
Rev. Noel Andersen  
Rev. Paula Stecker

Rev. Rebecca Barnes  
Rev. Ruth M Burgess  
Rev. Sandra L. Strauss  
Rev. Wayne A. Laws  
Rosemarie Pace  
Ruhá Temlock  
Sandra Craft  
Sister Anne Marie Gardiner, SSND  
Sister JoAnn Fleischaker, OP  
Sister Lillian Long  
Sister Sean Patrice  
Stephanie Minor  
Steve Herder  
Steve Holz-Russell  
Sue Weishar, Ph.D.  
Susan M Smith  
Suz Friedman  
Teresa Phillips  
The Rev. Constanze Hagmaier, Bishop of  
the South Dakota Synod, Evangelical  
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The Rev. Dr. Edward J. Kern  
The Rev. Randy P. Orso