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.¹ 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.² 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.³ Since May of last year, incidences of human rights violations committed by Cameroonian military forces and separatist groups have also increased.⁴

² https://www.unocha.org/cameroon/about
³ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/76573.pdf
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. 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. 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. 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.

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, a hunger strike held at Pine Prairie, LA this past June, and allegations that ICE officials used torture to make Cameroonians sign their own deportations orders, 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.

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

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6 https://fr.reuters.com/article/ozatp-uk-westafrique-floods-idAFKBN26218W-OZATP
8 https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/cm
12 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.” Similarly, the Torah commands, “You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the LORD am your God.” 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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14 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
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