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Paul Biya
President of the Republic of Cameroon
Presidential Palace
Yaoundé
Cameroun

03 February 2022

Your Excellency, Mr. President,

ARBITRARY DETENTION

Right now, all eyes are on Cameroon as the country hosts the 33rd edition of the African Cup of Nations. People from all over the world are watching African countries compete for the title in an atmosphere of excitement. But the cheering and celebrations shown by the media mask another reality in the country. Over a hundred people have been shut up in prison, most for over a year, and some for over five years now, simply for protesting. Most face substantial sentences that mean they'll be in prison for many more years. They have families that they desperately miss, and who miss them. The atmosphere in those prisons and in those families is not one of excitement, but one of anguish, pain and despair.

Indeed, while celebrations go on outside, these people are suffering inside crowded cells, counting the months or years that they have already spent in prison, and the months or years that await them still. They have done nothing beyond peacefully exercising their human rights. But Cameroon's draconian anti-terror law (2014) can be interpreted to criminalize even peaceful protest. Detaining people simply for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as detaining people after trials with no independent procedural safeguards, is arbitrary and unlawful.

To mention just a few of these people, there's **Dorgelesse NGUESSAN**, a hairdresser and single mother who was moved to join the MRC-led protest about how regional elections were being organized. She was arrested and detained for over a year and then sentenced to five years in prison by a military court. It was her first ever protest.

There's **PENN Terence KHAN**, vice-principal of CCAST (Cameroon College of Arts, Science and Technology) Bambili high school and a father of four. He was arrested, tortured, charged with terrorism and tried by a military court. The only evidence against him in the judgment is a T-shirt that reads '*Diaspora South Africa standing behind West Cameroonians 4 a Federal Cameroon*' and '*We are Cameroonians We are not extremists*'. He got 12 years in prison after joining protests in the Anglophone regions five years ago.

There's also **TSI Conrad**, a young independent journalist from the Anglophone regions who headed out to a protest with the intention of covering it – that is, doing his job. He was arrested on the spot and later sentenced to 15 years in prison by a military court. Like Penn Terence, he's now heading into his sixth year in prison. At least three other Anglophone journalists are also arbitrarily detained with Tsi Conrad. **MANCHO Bibixy TSE** and **Thomas AWAH Junior** were arrested in January 2017 and were convicted by the same military court to 15 and 11 years in jail, respectively. Mancho is also known for his human rights activism around the Anglophone crisis and for standing in a coffin as he gave a speech to fellow protesters. Another journalist, **Kingsley FUMUNYUY NJOKA**, who was arrested on May 15, 2020, has been detained (at first incommunicado) without trial for more than 20 months.

And **Intifalia OBEN**, a young trader who made custom T-shirts with MRC political slogans on them, not realising that it was the security forces who'd placed the order. They came to arrest him for having made the T-shirts. He was tortured so badly

that he fell ill with a lung infection and ended up chained to his hospital bed for 24 hours a day, even as he received treatment. He was sentenced to five years in prison by a military court.

The injustices and indignities faced by these people, and so many others, have multiplied as the months and years have passed. Most have reported being tortured, enduring horrendous detention conditions and suffering with extremely poor health. They are also dealing with the psychological trauma of all they have endured, isolation from their loved ones, and shock and grief at being denied their human rights and freedom.

We too are aggrieved and shocked, not only for these individuals and the injustice of their suffering, but also for the greater injustice that their arbitrary detention represents. If they are not free, then no Cameroonian is free. If they are languishing in prison for speaking out today, then anyone could be in prison for speaking out tomorrow.

We want to help bring change. Let us move forward towards a just future where human rights, and freedom of expression in particular, are truly respected. Let us ensure that these are people freed, reunited with their families and able to seek redress for the injustices visited upon them.

Mr President, we urge you to reform laws that are currently used to criminalize protest and public assembly and to ensure the release of all those arbitrarily detained because of acts of free expression and free assembly. As the AFCON celebrations die down and world's media move on from their focus on Cameroon, let's work to build a society that we can truly celebrate.

Sincerely,

Amnesty International



African Conscience



All Women Together



Breaking Ground



Cameroon O'Bosso



Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA)



Cercle des Educateurs Solidaires des Quartiers Réunis (CESOQUAR)



Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Peace in the North-West and South-West (The Coalition)



Collectif des Femmes pour la Protection de l'Environnement



Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)



Community Initiative for Peace, Social Cohesion and Development (CIPSCD)



Droit O Droit



Dynamique Citoyenne



Human is Right



Integrated Development Foundation



Katika 237



Libra Association for Widows



Mandela Center International



Nouveaux droits de l'homme (NDH)



Plate-Forme de la Société Civile pour la Démocratie



Plate-forme de la Société Civile pour la Démocratie
Civil Society Platform for democracy

Plate-forme de la Société Civile pour les Elections et la Démocratie au Cameroun



Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale (REDHAC)



Solutions Cameroon



SOS Jeunesse Libre



Stand Up For Cameroon



Un Monde d'Avenir



Volunteers for the Consolidation of National Unity (VOCONU)

