



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing**

### **Human Rights in Cameroon**

**Friday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**12:00pm – 1:00pm**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening Remarks as Prepared for Delivery**

Good afternoon. I am pleased to welcome my colleague and fellow member of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Jamie Raskin, and all of you in the audience to our briefing on the human rights situation in Cameroon.

I also want to thank our distinguished panelists for joining us today. I appreciate not only your expertise but also your patience when we had to re-schedule the date.

I'd also like to thank my constituents for sharing with me their concerns about the worsening human rights situation in Cameroon. As Members of Congress, we rely on our constituents to bring to our attention problems that might otherwise go unaddressed.

Cameroon has been in the news quite a bit recently because of growing tension between the Anglophone minority and the Francophone-led central government.

In late 2016 the government of President Paul Biya suppressed an Anglophone protest movement. Then last year the situation escalated when one Anglophone faction symbolically declared the secession of the region and some Anglophone groups took up arms.

The government has granted some minor concessions, but it has also arrested dozens of activists and deployed the military to put down unrest – and historical grievances have not been addressed. A related refugee and forced displacement crisis is growing.

But this conflict is not the only source of human rights violations in Cameroon.

There is an ongoing fight against Boko Haram in the far north. Since 2014, Boko Haram has reportedly killed nearly 1,000 civilians. Its brutal and often indiscriminate attacks have included suicide bombings, the kidnapping of women and girls, and widespread looting and destruction of property.

Unfortunately, Cameroonian security forces are also reported to have committed serious human rights abuses in their campaign to defeat Boko Haram. Enforced disappearances and torture, sometimes leading to death in custody, have been documented.

In addition, there are underlying governance problems that contribute to human rights abuses. President Biya has governed Cameroon since 1982, and is up for re-election again this year. Without term limits, political accountability is very hard to ensure.

And while Cameroonian law nominally provides for freedom of expression and of the press, these freedoms are restricted in practice.

We will hear about all of these issues today, and I hope we will also hear recommendations for what Congress should be doing to improve the situation on the ground.

Cameroon is a significant recipient of U.S. counterterrorism assistance. Are we making the best use of our leverage on that front?

I appreciated U.S. Ambassador Barlerin's recent reminder to President Biya that U.S. law prevents us from training or working with units against whom credible allegations of gross violations of human rights have been lodged.

But I still worry that strong U.S. support for Cameroon's anti-Boko Haram and counterterrorism efforts may be misread politically as giving the government a pass on its internal repression.

The U.S. has continued to support health programs in Cameroon. But are there other forms of foreign assistance or development and democracy assistance that should be stepped up?

And are we doing enough to promote dialogue between the Anglophone and Francophone communities? Should we be encouraging the Catholic Church to play a larger role? Are there international figures who are respected on all sides who could help facilitate a de-escalation of this growing crisis?

I want to emphasize something Ambassador Barlerin said recently. He is exactly right when he recognized that people on both sides of the Anglophone-Francophone conflict have engaged in speech that dehumanizes the opposite side. Our Commission staff ran into some of this as they prepared for the discussion today.

By now all of us should know that strategies that deny the human rights of the opposition do not generally lead to outcomes that are respectful of human rights. The means do matter for the ends.

So, let me close by encouraging all of us, in fact everyone who cares about Cameroon and wants to help end the current crisis, to make sure that our own actions are informed and guided by a commitment to human rights.

I turn now to Alexis Arieff of the Congressional Research Service, who will introduce our panelists and moderate the discussion.