

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

As community leaders and organizations dedicated to serving and advocating on behalf of the Liberian community, we write to bring to your attention an urgent issue facing Liberians living in the United States. **Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), which currently protects Liberians from deportation, will expire on March 31, 2009. We ask that you make the extension of DED for Liberians for an additional 18 months an immediate priority upon taking office to ensure that Liberians are not forcibly removed from the United States.**

Many Liberian refugees who fled civil war over the past two decades have made homes in the U.S. Now, they are in danger of deportation to a fragile country and separation from their families, livelihoods, and communities. The United States has extended protection from deportation to Liberians, either Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), since the outbreak of the Liberian civil war in 1990.

The fledgling democracy of Liberia, however, continues to face a period of critical rebuilding. Despite the progress that the country has made under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, conditions have not improved enough to absorb the estimated 3,600 Liberians currently residing legally in the U.S. who will have to leave by March 31, 2009 if DED is not extended.

Historical background.

The United States has a special historical relationship with the Liberian people. In 1822, a group of former slaves from the United States arrived in what was to become Liberia's capital city, Monrovia—named after U.S. President James Monroe. The national language of Liberia is English. Liberia has been a strategic and military ally to the United States, particularly during World War II when Liberia provided access to rubber and served as a troop transit point for American forces.

It is not surprising that when civil war erupted in Liberia in 1989, forcing hundreds of thousands of Liberians to flee, many looked to the United States for peace, safety, employment, health, and education. Liberians left one of the bloodiest conflicts in recent history. Horrific violence and human rights abuses, including mass executions, torture, dismemberment, rape, looting, banditry, and the widespread use of child combatants, traumatized the Liberian population and left the country's infrastructure in ruins.

About half of Liberia's citizenry was displaced and now resides throughout Africa, Europe, and the U.S. As many as 270,000 reside lawfully in the U.S., with large Liberian communities in California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. While most have obtained legal permanent residence, the

Department of Homeland Security estimates that approximately 3,600 have only the temporary legal status that is conferred by DED.

Current situation in the U.S.

In metropolitan areas with large Liberian communities, the termination of DED would adversely affect certain sectors of the economy, such as long-term healthcare, that employ large numbers of Liberians. In these areas, entire neighborhoods would be affected by people leaving their houses, apartments, and businesses behind.

Also at issue is family separation. Liberians who sought protection in the U.S. have painstakingly rebuilt their lives. They married and raised families here—including both U.S.-born and Liberian-born children. Forcing the return of those under DED would tear families apart.

Current situation in Liberia.

Liberians should not be sent back to a country that is still struggling to recover from the devastation of war. The Liberian government needs time to rebuild the infrastructure and social services necessary to support its population and to establish a stable and secure democracy. With the election of President Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia has been able to achieve a fragile stability. Nonetheless, life expectancy in Liberia today is just under 42 years. The risk of contracting diseases such as malaria, yellow fever and typhoid are extremely high. More than 85 percent of the population is unemployed. Nearly all Liberians remaining in the country live in Monrovia, which has virtually no power, clean water, or habitable building. President Johnson Sirleaf has raised concerns that the return of those with DED “would put an unbearable burden on our already strained resources.”

Liberians residing lawfully in the U.S. have been a valuable source of assistance to their relatives and friends in Liberia, sending them money that helps stimulate Liberia’s weak economy. This source of support would be severely diminished if Liberians are forced to leave the U.S.

Please act now.

We know that people do not flee their homes without reason. They leave to escape oppression, violence, poverty and desperation. They emigrate in the belief that new surroundings offer them and their families safety and security. Many Liberians have sought safety in the U.S. They have become our neighbors and have enriched our lives and our economy.

Please act immediately to ensure that Deferred Enforced Departure for Liberians does not end on March 31, 2009.

Respectfully,

The Advocates for Human Rights, Minneapolis, MN

All Souls Unitarian Universalist, Immigration Task Force, Kansas City, MO

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Philadelphia, PA

American Jewish Committee, New York, NY

American Refugee Committee, Minneapolis, MN

Asian American Justice Center (AAJC), Washington, DC

Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture, New York, NY

Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition, Washington, DC

CASA de Maryland, of Silver Spring, Wheaton, Gaithersburg, and Baltimore, MD

Catholic Charities, Immigration Services, Archdiocese of Atlanta

Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), Washington, DC

Center for Victims of Torture, Minneapolis, MN

Chaldean Federation of America, Farmington Hills, MI

Coalition for New South Carolinians, Columbia, SC

CommunityHealth Center of Richmond, Staten Island, NY

Deported Diaspora, Boston, MA; Cambodia; Cape Verde

El Centro del Inmigrante, Staten Island, NY

The Episcopal Church, Washington, DC

Hawaii Hispanic News, Honolulu, HI

Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), New York, NY

HIAS and Council Migration Service, Philadelphia, PA

Hispanas Organizadas de Lake y Ashtabula (HOLA), Ashtabula, OH

Human Rights First, New York, NY

Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN

International Rescue Committee (IRC), New York, NY

IRATE/First Friends Visitor Program, Elizabeth, NJ

Jewish Alliance for Law & Social Action (JALSA), Boston, MA

Jewish Community Action, St. Paul, MN

Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona, Tucson, AZ

Jewish Vocational Service, Kansas City, MO

Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, New York, NY

Jubilee Campaign USA, Fairfax, VA

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Baltimore, MD

Mennonite Central Committee, Washington, DC Office

NAACP, Washington, DC

National Council of Jewish Women, Washington, DC

National Immigrant Justice Center, Chicago, IL

National Immigrant Solidarity Network, Los Angeles, CA

Pennsylvania Immigration Resource Center (PIRC), York, PA

Priority Africa Network (PAN), Oakland, CA

Progressive Jewish Alliance, Los Angeles, CA

Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Washington, DC

United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society, Washington, DC

US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Washington, DC

Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project, Washington, DC

Westchester Hispanic Coalition, Mount Vernon, NY

West Coast Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Rancho Palos Verdes, CA

Women's Refugee Commission, New York, NY

The Workmen's Circle /Arbeter Ring, New York, NY

World Relief, Baltimore, MD