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Minneapolis-Based Center for Victims of Torture Calls on President Obama to Prevent Deportation of Thousands of Liberian Refugees

Center Treats Liberian Torture Survivors in the Twin Cities and Operates Treatment Center in Liberia

Minneapolis, MN- Today, the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) sent a letter to President Barack Obama urging him to extend the Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) status of thousands of Liberian refugees living in the U.S. for an additional 18 months. Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center—two suburban Minnesota communities where many Liberian families live—would be severely impacted by the mass deportations.

As a result of the armed conflict, approximately 270,000 Liberians reside outside the country. Many living in the U.S. have obtained legal permanent residence; however, about 3,600 have only temporary legal status and will be deported to Liberia unless an extension of DED is granted. Liberia has an 85 percent unemployment rate.

“We know that the specter of deportation has made many of our Liberian clients anxious about their futures—impeding their recovery. These are refugees who think of the U.S. not only as a precious safe haven that has given them security and tools to recover from the unimaginable atrocities they suffered, but also as their home,” wrote Douglas A. Johnson, Executive Director, Center for Victims of Torture. “Liberians living in Minnesota and a handful of other states have raised families in the U.S. and become an integral part of the fabric of the communities in which they live.”

CVT is deeply concerned about the significant humanitarian challenges returning thousands of refugees to Liberia would pose for Liberia’s government, as well the potential setback for U.S. strategic interests in fostering democratic development in regions destabilized by conflict. According to the Department of State, “Despite nearly four years of peace and a renewal of economic growth, Liberia is still one of the poorest countries in the world and many basic services (public power, water and sewage, land line phones) are either limited or unavailable.”

“There is no benefit to the U.S. of sending Liberians back to a country that does not have the public infrastructure or institutions to absorb them. U.S. strategic interests are not served by unnecessarily encumbering this struggling democracy with additional economic burdens,” wrote Douglas A. Johnson in the letter to President Obama. “The U.S. has made an investment in Liberia. Flooding the country with thousands of new citizens would undo the progress Liberia has made in the past few years.”

CVT extends care and rehabilitative services to Liberian torture survivors living in the U.S. and operates a treatment center in Liberia. CVT has cared for nearly 4,000 torture survivors in Liberia—1,089 in the last year alone. CVT operates a center in Lofa County, Liberia—the area with the highest number of refugee returnees. CVT clinicians train local staff to become paraprofessional psychosocial counselors and works to strengthen the capacity of community leaders, teachers and health care workers to recognize the effects of trauma.

About Center for Victims of Torture

Founded in 1985, CVT was the first comprehensive torture treatment facility in the United States, and the third in the world. It has provided care to thousands of torture survivors at its clinics in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, West Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Earlier this year, CVT opened a rehabilitation program for Iraqi torture survivors living in Jordan.

For more information, visit www.cvt.org.

LETTER

March 20, 2009

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

Dear President Obama,

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) extends care and rehabilitative services to Liberian torture survivors living in the U.S. and operates a treatment center in Liberia. Compelled by concern for the clients we serve in Minnesota and their families, and the extraordinary hardship of daily life that we witness in Liberia, we urge you to extend the Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) for an additional 18 months.

Without an extension, DED will expire on March 31, 2009. Failure to extend it will result in devastating consequences for the 3,600 Liberians living in the U.S. who face deportation. Moreover, it would create significant humanitarian challenges for Liberia's government. And it would be a setback for U.S. strategic interests in fostering democratic development in regions destabilized by conflict.

With more than 85 percent unemployment, Liberia—a small nation with approximately three and half million people—stands at the beginning of a long, precarious road to recovery from a brutal civil war. As a result of the armed conflict, approximately 270,000 Liberians reside outside the country. Many living in the U.S. have obtained legal permanent residence; however, about 3,600 have only temporary legal status and will be deported to Liberia unless an extension of DED is granted.

We are deeply concerned for the well-being of thousands of Liberians who are at risk of being deported to a nation with few jobs available and a shattered infrastructure. According to the Department of State, *“Despite nearly four years of peace and a renewal of economic growth, Liberia is still one of the poorest countries in the world and many basic services (public power, water and sewage, land line phones) are either limited or unavailable.”*

We know that the specter of deportation has made many of our Liberian clients anxious about their futures—impeding their recovery. These are refugees who think of the U.S. not only as a precious safe haven that has given them security and tools to recover from the unimaginable atrocities they suffered, but also as their home. Liberians living in Minnesota and a handful of other states have raised families in the U.S. and become an integral part of the fabric of the communities in which they live.

In Minnesota, Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center—two suburban communities that have been deeply enriched by the contributions of the many Liberian families who live there—would be greatly impacted. Liberians in Minnesota, some who have lived in the U.S. for nearly two decades, have earned college and graduate degrees, paid taxes and raised strong families.

Through our International Services program, CVT provides mental health services to torture and trauma survivors in post-conflict situations. In addition to our centers in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Jordan, CVT operates a treatment center in Lofa County, Liberia —the area with the highest number of refugee returnees.

Since CVT began its work in Liberia, we have cared for nearly 4,000 torture survivors. In last year alone, CVT treated 1,089 individuals. Because sexual violence was central to the conflict, CVT works to address this group's special needs as part of the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence taskforce. We are an active participant in the Mental Health Task Force and the Mental Health Policy Group that will help the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare develop mental health policy. Additionally, our clinicians train local staff to become paraprofessional psychosocial counselors (PSCs). We have trained more than 100 PSCs in Liberia and currently employ 15. CVT also works to strengthen the capacity

of community leaders, teachers and health care workers to recognize the effects of trauma.

Not only will Liberian refugees who are forced to return to Liberia face incredible hardship, their arrival in Liberia will overburden Liberia's tenuous infrastructure. With 85 percent unemployment, thousands more citizens seeking jobs and support would be a tremendous strain on the economy. At the same time, the forced departure of these refugees to Liberia would mean a significant loss of revenue for Liberia's fragile economy. As in many immigrant communities, Liberians living in the U.S. send remittances to family members in their homeland.

There is no benefit to the U.S. of sending Liberians back to a country that does not have the public infrastructure or institutions to absorb them. U.S. strategic interests are not served by unnecessarily encumbering this struggling democracy with additional economic burdens. The U.S. has made an investment in Liberia. Flooding the country with thousands of new citizens would undo the progress Liberia has made in the past few years.

In September 2007, recognizing the grave concerns that we voice today, President George W. Bush deferred enforced departure for 18 months. We ask that you do the same before it expires on March 31, 2009.

With best regards,

Douglas A. Johnson
Executive Director
Center for Victims of Torture