

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

May 8, 2020

President Paul Biya  
Palais de L'Unité  
BP 1000  
Yaoundé  
Cameroon

Dear President Biya:

In the spirit of the recent efforts to recognize the important work of journalists—including the global #FreeThePress campaign, World Press Freedom Day on May 3, and the awarding of prestigious Pulitzer Prizes on May 4—we write to call for the release of three journalists in Cameroon: Amadou Vamouké, Tsi Conrad, and Thomas Awah Junior. Detained in recent years on politically-motivated charges, the treatment of these journalists and others in Cameroon reflects a troubling pattern of repression regarding free speech and freedom of the press. Given their dubious detention and danger of infection by the coronavirus, to which prison populations are especially vulnerable, we urge that these three journalists be released without delay.

Cameroon has historically had an active and diverse media. However, in recent years, there has been a troubling increase in restrictions on freedom of expression and independent media as well as abuse of the country's libel laws. The U.S. Department of State's 2019 Human Rights Report noted that individuals "who criticized the [Cameroon] government publicly or privately frequently faced reprisals," while Freedom House has bluntly categorized Cameroon's press as "not free."

The cases of Vamouké, Conrad, and Awah Jr. appear to be clear examples of the lack of press freedom in Cameroon. According to Vamouké's lawyer, his arrest and imprisonment in 2016 for alleged embezzlement was reprisal for his management of Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), which he headed from 2005 to 2016. Since his detention, Vamouké has yet to be formally charged, despite 20 hearings at the Special Criminal Court. Conrad is similarly awaiting a hearing before a military appeal tribunal for his 2018 sentencing to 15 years in prison on charges of hostility against the state, contempt for civil authority, and spreading false news, and has reportedly been tortured while in custody in Yaounde, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Awah Jr. was arrested in 2017 while interviewing protesters for Afrik2 Radio and sentenced in 2018 to 11 years in prison for alleged hostility to the fatherland, spreading false news, and contempt for civil authority. Both Conrad and Awah Jr. have since been sentenced with additional questionable charges. Moreover, Awah Jr. has suffered from poor physical and mental health, and since being incarcerated, has been treated for tuberculosis and pneumonia. Appeals to charges that Conrad and Awah Jr. are involved in Cameroon's crisis in the English-speaking territories have also been postponed several times since submitting the requests in June 2019.

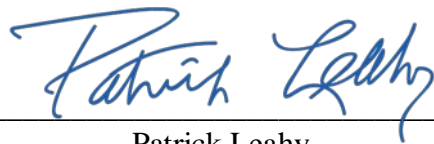
As the Committee to Protect Journalists stated on World Press Freedom Day 2020, “Jailing journalists is the hallmark of an authoritarian regime, but keeping them in jail in the midst of a pandemic is sheer cruelty...The free circulation of information and ideas is essential to fighting COVID-19, and journalists can’t do their job from behind bars.” In the past, you have worked with some of us to release others unjustly detained in Cameroon. We urge you to demonstrate similar leadership and mercy during this unprecedented global crisis by immediately releasing Vamoulké, Conrad, and Awah Jr.

Sincerely,



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Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



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Patrick Leahy  
United States Senator



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Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator

/S/ CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

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Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator



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Karen Bass  
Member of Congress