



Public Statement

The Law Society of Upper Canada expresses grave concern about the arrest and detention of lawyer Felix Agbor Balla in Cameroon

Toronto, ON – The Law Society of Upper Canada* expresses grave concern about the arrest and detention of lawyer Felix Agbor Balla in Cameroon.

Felix Agbor Balla is a human rights lawyer with a long history of international and domestic human rights work, including service with both the United Nations and the Special Court for Sierra Leone. He is the president of the recently banned Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (“CACSC”), an organization which works to promote anglophone rights in primarily French-speaking Cameroon.

Since Cameroon’s independence, many anglophone Cameroonians have felt marginalized in a country where the majority of the population reads, writes and speaks French. Late last year, protests erupted against the use of French in courts, schools and universities. In Bamenda, the country’s largest anglophone city, at least four people were killed this past December when security forces fired live ammunition into the air and launched tear gas into a market despite there being no evidence that a protest was taking place.

It has been brought to the Law Society’s attention that on January 17, 2017, Felix Agbor Balla and CACSC Secretary General Fontem Neba were arrested after organizing “ghost towns” – stay-at-home protests against “oppression, marginalization, and deprivation”. Earlier that day, the Minister of Territorial Administration banned the activities of the CACSC. On January 24, 2017, the two men were officially charged with terrorism, rebellion against the state, incitement of civil unrest and breach of the constitution. Their trial, which was initially scheduled to begin on February 1, 2017, officially commenced before a military court in Yaoundé, Cameroon on February 13, 2017. At the hearing, Felix Agbor Balla and his colleague pleaded not guilty to the various charges brought against them. The trial was then adjourned to March 23, 2017, and it is expected that witnesses and evidence will be called at that time. If convicted, the two men could face the death penalty. Felix Agbor Balla and his colleague have remained in detention since their arrests.

The Law Society of Upper Canada is deeply concerned about Felix Agbor Balla’s situation and urges the government of Cameroon to comply with Cameroon’s obligations under international human rights laws, including the United Nations’ *Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers*.

Article 16 of the *Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers* states:

Governments shall ensure that lawyers (a) are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; (b) are able to travel and to consult with their clients freely both within their own country and abroad; and (c) shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economics or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards and ethics.

Article 17 states:

Where the security of lawyers is threatened as a result of discharging their functions, they shall be adequately safeguarded by the authorities.

Article 18 states:

Lawyers shall not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes as a result of discharging their functions.

Moreover, Article 23 states:

Lawyers like other citizens are entitled to freedom of expression, belief, association and assembly. In particular, they shall have the right to take part in public discussion of matters concerning the law, the administration of justice and the promotion and protection of human rights and to join or form local, national or international organizations and attend their meetings, without suffering professional restrictions by reason of their lawful action or their membership in a lawful organization.

The Law Society urges the government of Cameroon to:

- a. immediately and unconditionally release Felix Agbor Balla;
- b. guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Felix Agbor Balla;
- c. ensure that any proceedings against Felix Agbor Balla are carried out in full compliance with his right to a fair trial, as protected under international law;
- d. put an end to all acts of harassment against Felix Agbor Balla and all other human rights lawyers and defenders in Cameroon; and
- e. ensure in all circumstances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments.

**The Law Society of Upper Canada is the governing body for more than 50,000 lawyers and 8,000 paralegals in the province of Ontario, Canada. The Treasurer is the head of the Law Society. The mandate of the Law Society is to govern the legal profession in the public*

interest by upholding the independence, integrity and honour of the legal profession for the purpose of advancing the cause of justice and the rule of law.

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For more information, please contact Susan Tonkin, Communications Advisor - Media Relations, at 416-947-7605 or stonkin@lsuc.on.ca.

The Law Society of Upper Canada
Osgoode Hall, 130 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario, M5H 2N6
www.lsuc.on.ca

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