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H.E. Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister of the State of Israel
Sent to the Prime Minister via Ambassador Ron Dermer in Washington, DC
emb1@washington.mfa.gov.il

Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu,

As members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) of the United States Congress, we write to express our concern regarding the impending deportation of African migrants from Israel. We urge the government of Israel, a close American friend and ally, to pursue alternative means to respond to the African migrants who seek refuge within its borders.

The complexity of the immigration issue Israel faces is well known. Since the mid-2000s, between 38,000 to 41,000 African asylum seekers have arrived in Israel, primarily from Eritrea and Sudan, countries characterized by political instability and violence. Migrants were frequently victims of kidnapping, torture, and sexual violence, yet despite these risks, thousands of asylum seekers continued to make the perilous journey to Israel.

The Government of Israel began relocating migrants to the Holot Detention Facility in December 2013, a practice that has been criticized by the Israeli High Court of Justice on many occasions. Until recently, Israel has granted asylum seekers collective protection and temporary conditional-release visas that must frequently be renewed. As a result of the collective protection designation, less than one half of a percent of asylum seekers have been granted refugee status, and do not have access to work permits, health care, or welfare services. In August 2017, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that African migrants may be resettled to third-party states where their safety is not at risk and that migrants cannot be detained for longer than two months. More recently, the Israeli government has offered African migrants \$3500 and airfare to leave Israel voluntarily by March. Those who do not accept this offer face detention for 60 days and deportation.

We are deeply concerned for the welfare of African migrants who have been resettled and the risk to those who face deportation. Press reports indicate that migrants who have been resettled in third-party countries have faced torture and extortion. Furthermore, nonprofit groups have reported that migrants are not granted a legal path to asylum or temporary protected status in their resettlement countries, nor adequate opportunities for employment. The Office of the United

Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNCHR) has raised concerns that migrants “have not found adequate safety or a durable solution to their plight and that many have subsequently attempted dangerous onward movements within Africa or to Europe.” Even more alarming are reports that migrants are vulnerable to human traffickers and can become trapped in a cycle of abuse, sent to prison camps where they are tortured, or die attempting to flee to other nations. We are therefore greatly troubled by the plight of African migrants after their departure from Israel.

We appreciate the acute concerns which inform the Israeli government’s decision to deport migrants: the difficulty of vetting undocumented migrants; and concerns that African refugees seek employment in Israel, not refuge. We further empathize with Israel’s desire to protect its national security and independently shape its immigration policy. Nonetheless, the strikingly small number of African migrants who have been granted asylum in the country raises doubts about the veracity of the adjudication process.

Furthermore, the CBC is not alone in raising concerns about an immigration policy of deportation. A number of Jewish Americans and prominent Jewish leaders, including hundreds of academics, authors, artists, and rabbis, have urged the Israeli government to change course. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and HIAS have publicly written to the Office of the Prime Minister, expressing their concern with the planned removal of African migrants. These organizations, along with prominent Jewish thinkers, have emphasized that mass deportation does not align with Jewish values and teachings. We share their concerns. We urge Israel to amend its immigration policy towards African migrants.

As a close friend of the United States and vital regional ally, Israel is a beacon of democracy and good governance in the Middle East. While we appreciate the unique difficulties Israel faces with regard to large numbers of African refugees, we urge the government to refrain from deporting migrants. Asylum seekers face insurmountable odds: those who have previously left Israel report that promised legal protections remain unfulfilled, placing their legal status and safety in continued jeopardy. Given such a discouraging state of affairs, we seek to mitigate a potential humanitarian crisis. We encourage Israel to work with international partners, including the UNHCR, to develop alternative immigration policies that will ensure the safety of migrants alongside international standards, while also addressing Israel’s security concerns.

We look forward to hearing from you regarding this crucial matter.

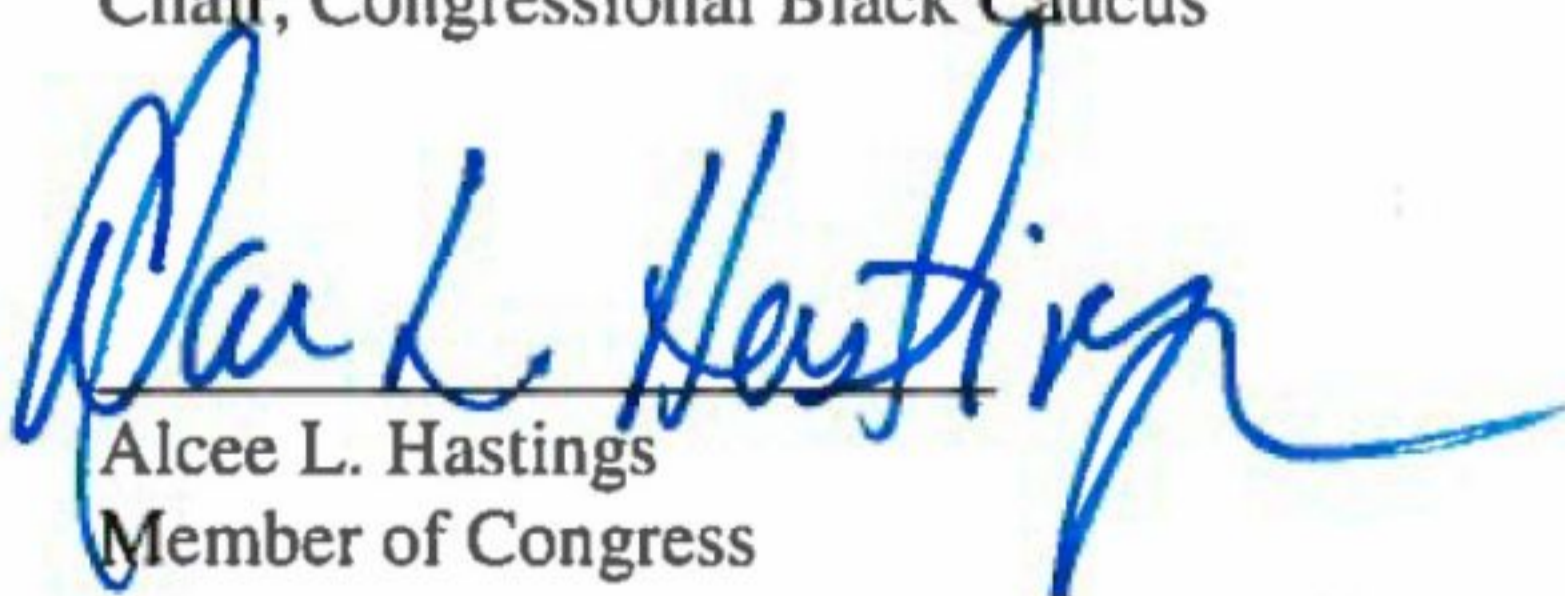
With warm regards,



Cedric L. Richmond
Chair, Congressional Black Caucus



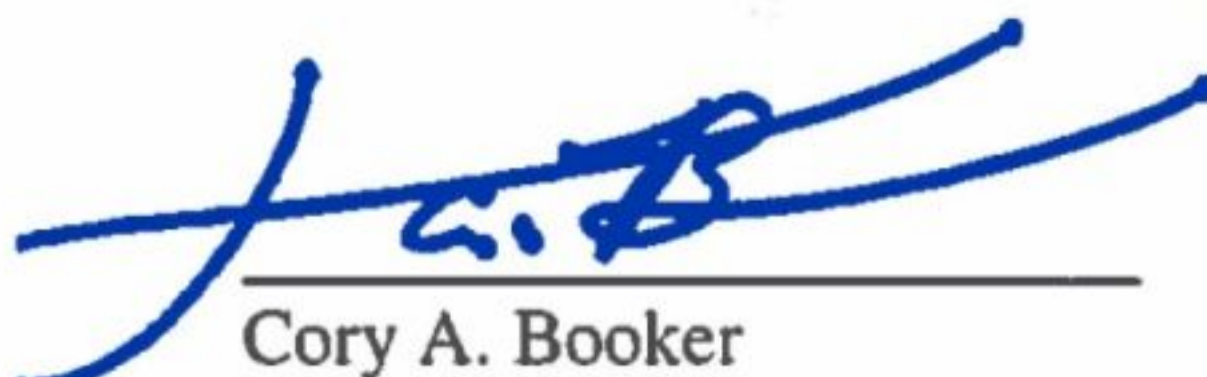
Karen Bass
Member of Congress



Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Cory A. Booker
U.S. Senator



Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress