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FREEDOM NOW

MEDIA RELEASE

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LAPIRO DE MBANGA RELEASED FROM PRISON

Washington, DC: Today, the Cameroonian government released musician and social activist Lapiro de Mbanga from New Bell prison, known in Cameroon as “hell on earth” because of its notoriously harsh conditions and overcrowding.

“We are relieved that the Cameroonian government has finally ended Lapiro’s unjust imprisonment and has released him,” said Maran Turner, Executive Director of Freedom Now. “After three years in prison, he can finally be at home with his family. I call on the government to cease its harassment of Lapiro and his family and allow him to continue to inspire the Cameroonian people with his music.”

Lapiro, also known as “*Ndinga Man*” or “*Guitar Man*”, is a popular singer-songwriter and prominent political and social activist in Cameroon. Providing a voice for Cameroon’s underprivileged, he is known for using satirical lyrics to address corruption and injustice through his songs.

Lapiro was arrested in the Spring of 2008. He was accused of fomenting a series of mass demonstrations and strikes that took place throughout February 2008. Though charged with complicity in looting and destruction of property, the charges against Lapiro were baseless and were brought in retaliation for his criticism of the government. Months before his arrest, Mbanga released a song he wrote entitled “*Constitution Constipée*”. The song admonished President Biya for holding onto power and asked him to step down, after 28 years in office. Lapiro was sentenced to three years in prison and substantial monetary fines after a trial that failed to meet international standards of due process.

The Cameroonian government violated international law by prosecuting and detaining Lapiro de Mbanga for exercising his internationally-protected right to freedom of expression. In acknowledgement of his sacrifice, Lapiro was the winner of the Freedom to Create Prize in 2009. Lapiro continues his fight, seeking justice in the courtrooms of Cameroon, by filing civil cases against government ministers for wrongful imprisonment.

For more than two years, Freedom Now worked to mobilize international pressure for Lapiro’s release, collaborating with the organization Freemuse and Vigier Guitars, and with the support of the Lantos Foundation and RealNetworks Foundation. Lawyers with the law firm Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP represented Lapiro as *pro bono* international counsel and, among other initiatives, filed his case with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; a decision was expected in May. Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) has been a strong advocate for Lapiro in seeking his freedom from unlawful detention. We call on the Government of Cameroon to uphold international law and respect the Cameroonian peoples’ right to freedom of expression and right against arbitrary detention.

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Our mission is to free prisoners of conscience through focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts.