

## LYDIA AND BERNARD MUST STAY CAMPAIGN

Press Release

Tuesday, June 21st

### **CAMPAIGNERS FOR PLAYWRIGHT LYDIA BESONG LAUNCH APPEAL FUND FOR JUDICIAL REVIEW**

Campaigners for playwright Lydia Besong and her husband Bernard Batey have launched an appeal to raise funds for a judicial review of their case. The couple's numerous supporters are also being urged to write immediately to the Home Secretary asking that Lydia and Bernard be given leave to remain in the UK.

Their fresh claim for asylum was turned down by the UKBA and a subsequent appeal refused. And now an application for leave to appeal to the High Court has also been turned down.

A spokesperson for the Lydia and Bernard Must Stay Campaign said: "This is a clear human rights issue. Lydia and Bernard have been persecuted, imprisoned and tortured in Cameroon for their membership of the Southern Cameroon National Council, a peaceful political party.

"Only last month, Amnesty International published a report saying that members of the SCNC still face arrest and imprisonment. Lydia is well known as both as a political activist and as a playwright. Their lives would be in grave danger if they were to be returned to Cameroon."

Last year, Lydia was held in detention for four weeks over the Christmas period and she and Bernard were threatened with deportation. The flight was halted by a High Court judge and the UKBA said their case would be reviewed.

In Cameroon, Lydia taught English and English Literature and Bernard ran his own business. They were forced to leave their home because of their membership of the SCNC, which campaigns for the rights of the English speaking minority of Southern Cameroon. The couple were imprisoned and tortured in Cameroon, they faced beatings and Lydia was raped by a uniformed prison guard. They have both been traumatised by these experiences and are subject to severe depression.

Amnesty International's most recent report, published last month, says the Government in Cameroon continues to attempt to silence critics of its policies. "The Government continues to curtail the activities of the SCNC, a non violent secessionist group whose members face arrest and imprisonment."

A writer in Cameroon was recently released following a strong campaign by Amnesty International. He had been held in extremely harsh prison conditions for six months after writing a book about the president's wife.

Lydia has written three plays, one of which remains unpublished and is critical of President Paul Biya, who has ruled in Cameroon for 28 years.

Her play “How I Became an Asylum Seeker” has been performed in Manchester, Salford, Liverpool and London. In London, she shared a platform with actor Juliet Stevenson in a discussion around issues raised by the play. The performance and discussion in London was organised by Women for Refugee Women who are also supporting Lydia in her fight to remain in the UK. In January, Juliet Stevenson sent a message of support to the vigil for Lydia which was held outside the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal in Manchester.

Lydia and Bernard received strong backing from their former Rochdale MP Paul Rowen who said he knew their case well and believed there was a “real and substantial danger to Ms Besong and Mr Batey should they be returned to Cameroon.”

The couple are also supported by RAPAR, the Manchester based human rights organisation which works with displaced people, Women Asylum Seekers Together, Community Arts North West and the Gap Unit.

Lydia and Bernard lived in Rochdale for three years before being re-housed in Bury. They have widespread support in both communities and also in Manchester where they have worked as volunteers for human rights organisations. They are valued members of the congregation at St Ann's Church, Belfield, Rochdale, and the Bishop of Manchester has spoken out publicly on their behalf.

Members of English PEN, the organisation which campaigns for writers and playwrights internationally, have also backed Lydia and Bernard's fight to remain in the UK.

The Lydia and Bernard Must Stay Campaign spokesperson added: “This couple are an asset to the community of Greater Manchester. It is a sad reflection on our society if we cannot give refuge to people who have been persecuted for exercising their right to freedom of expression.”

**The link to the petition for Lydia and Bernard is**  
[http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/lydia\\_and\\_bernard](http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/lydia_and_bernard)

**For more information, please contact:**

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