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July 22, 2019

H.E. Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister of the State of Israel

Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu,

On behalf of the members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) of the United States House of Representatives, I write to express our deep concern over the treatment of people of African descent in Israel, and our desire for information regarding incidents over the past few years, including recent events. This inquiry is consonant with a role that the CBC has played throughout its history, monitoring the situation of those of African origin all over the world, and working to assure that U.S. policy takes those concerns into account.

Our concerns relate to two areas: police treatment of Ethiopian Israelis and other migrants; and the state's treatment of African migrants seeking asylum or the opportunity to immigrate to Israel.

We understand that Israel has faced the challenge of integrating into its society people from a wide range of national origins, bound together by their Jewish faith. We know that tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel in the 1980's and 1990's during Operations Moses and Solomon, respectively. Israel continues to allow additional immigrants from Africa into the country who seek to reunite with their families. Through this process, many Ethiopians have been rescued from poverty, famine, and war. Our current concern stems from ongoing reports that those immigrants find themselves and their families in sub-standard housing in under-developed communities, and with unequal access to the health care system and widening achievement gaps for their students in school. Ethiopian-Israelis serve in the Israeli army, as required by law, and are proud to do so. Yet we hear reports that they feel treated as second-class citizens there, too.

These problems were thrown into sharp relief most recently when an unarmed 18-year-old Ethiopian immigrant named Solomon Tekah was killed by an off-duty police officer at the end of June. Though we understand that the history of Black people in the United States is vastly different than the history of Black people in Israel, it nonetheless resonated deeply with our own history and experiences in America when Shula Mola, the chair of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, reiterated the fear of many after the release of the police officer who shot and killed Solomon Tekah: "There is no limit to the rudeness and lack of justice. It's like we're

living on a different planet, as if laws, values and norms do not apply when it comes to Ethiopians.”

African Americans know well that our nation is far from solving the devastation of unequal treatment of Black people by the police, including the killing of unarmed civilians. While we acknowledge the work that remains here at home, however, we feel a responsibility to work to address these issues wherever they arise. Accounts of systemic discrimination by police across Israel, both current and longstanding, continue to surface in the press in the wake of the widespread protests against Solomon Tekah’s death. Ethiopian Israelis have also used social media to share their stories, giving accounts of unequal treatment in school, while shopping, in the workplace and in the military. In many cases, these accounts have been met with deeply disturbing racist responses from other social media users. We hope you can understand our concern that this could escalate violence against Ethiopian-Israelis and others of African origin.

Just as the CBC works diligently to address disparities and systemic problems in the U.S., we would urge the nation of Israel, our close friend and ally, to take affirmative actions to address the problems at the root of recent protests, to engage actively with leaders of the Ethiopian-Israeli community, and to protect the right to free speech and association. To that end, we seek to learn:

1. What steps are being taken among municipal police agencies to examine and address claims of disproportional use of force against Black Israelis, especially the shooting of unarmed civilians?
2. What outreach and programs has the Israeli government and its agencies undertaken in concert with the Ethiopian Israeli community to assess, reduce and eliminate ongoing disparities?

In addition to our concern regarding Ethiopian Israelis, we remain concerned for the welfare of African migrants who have sought asylum in Israel, those who remain in detention camps, and those who face deportation or have been removed from Israel.

We acknowledge that population movements across the globe pose significant challenges to receiving nations, including our own. CBC members have been active in condemning U.S. policies on the inhumane treatment of migrants attempting to seek asylum here and will continue to do so in the strongest possible terms. Nonetheless, as noted at the beginning of this letter, the CBC has taken a decades-long interest in the wellbeing of those of African descent all over the world. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNCHR) has raised concerns that migrants in Israel “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.” Press and nonprofit organizations have reported that migrants are not granted a legal path to seek asylum or temporary protected status, nor adequate opportunities for legal employment. Even more alarming are reports that migrants are vulnerable to human traffickers and can become trapped in a cycle of abuse after their departure from Israel. Several reports state that African migrants are being sent to third countries for resettlement without adequate regard to their safety in the new country.

Even if they are allowed into Israel proper and gain employment while awaiting a decision on their cases, press reports indicate that migrants’ wages are subject to a twenty percent “tax,” with that amount only available to the migrant on departure from the country. This reportedly has the effect of trapping migrants in entrenched poverty. The U.S. State Department has called on Israel to repeal this “deposit law” and further noted that the law “significantly increases vulnerabilities to trafficking” among African migrants. Again, we seek to learn:

3. What steps is the Israeli government taking to combat vulnerability of migrants to trafficking and/or abuse when deported or resettled in a third country?
4. What is the Israeli government’s response to the concern expressed by the U.S. State Department about the deposit tax on migrant wages? We would appreciate statistics and details on the implementation of this tax.

Several Jewish Americans and prominent Jewish leaders, including academics, authors, artists, and rabbis have joined their Israeli counterparts in urging the Israeli government to change its highly restrictive laws regarding African migrants. The Anti-Defamation League and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society have publicly written to the Office of the Prime Minister expressing their concern with the planned removal of African migrants. We share their concerns and urge Israel to amend its immigration policy towards African migrants.

We look forward to hearing from you regarding these important matters.

Sincerely,



Karen Bass
Chair, Congressional Black Caucus