

Friends of detained Cameroonian fight his deportation

WORCESTER, Mass. – Friends of a Cameroonian Catholic who has been detained in a Massachusetts county jail and faces deportation fear he will be tortured or beaten if he is returned to his homeland.

Legal options have run out for Richard Sitcha, 45, a former member of St. Anne-Immaculate Conception Parish in Hartford, Conn., who says he fled his homeland and came to the United States to escape political persecution.

“We are afraid that if he gets turned over to the Cameroonian authorities, he will be imprisoned, tortured or will just disappear,” said Lorena Dutelle, a member of the Hartford parish who befriended Sitcha several years ago.

On Dec. 11, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals denied Sitcha a stay of deportation and he could be returned to his country any day now, according to a communique from the U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement agency. His passport has expired and that could briefly forestall his deportation.

He has spent the past four years in Connecticut and Massachusetts jails, fighting the deportation order. Federal authorities granted then rescinded Sitcha’s political asylum in 2003.

He was imprisoned under a post-Sept. 11, 2001, immigration policy that allows the government to incarcerate refugees pending appeal.

Dutelle belongs to the Sitcha Defense Committee, a small group of friends and supporters who have assisted the Cameroonian refugee during his odyssey through the U.S. immigration system.

Several committee members have contacted Janet Garvey, the U.S. ambassador to Cameroon, and asked her to monitor Sitcha’s situation upon his return to his homeland.

How a person gets deported depends on the individual's situation said Ernestine Fobbs, public affairs officer for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"If the person is charged in a convicted felony, they will be escorted by U.S. officials to the border of their country. In other cases, they will simply be put on a plane. There are many different ways that we have to expeditiously remove someone from the U.S.," she said.

What will happen to Sitcha after he gets off the plane in Cameroon remains an unknown. He is married and has two children. But his wife reportedly fled the country after he did, leaving their children in the care of Sitcha's family.

Daryl Grisgraber, a refugee case worker for Amnesty International, said her organization does not have the capacity to track people after their removal from the U.S., but added that "it's certainly possible asylum seekers who are deported may be sent directly to prison."

Although unfamiliar with the details of Sitcha's story, Father Michel Legault, a Missionary of the Holy Apostles who worked in Cameroon for 20 years, predicted imprisonment or worse for the Cameroonian refugee. Father Legault, who now teaches at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Conn., described the government of Cameroonian President Paul Biya as a dictatorship.

"The fact that (Sitcha) asked for political asylum is sufficient for the government to feel insulted. His deportation is very serious. It's like a condemnation to death," Father Legault said.

Imprisonment would be a harsh fate for Sitcha. Cameroon's prisons are overcrowded and life-threatening, according to a 2006 U.S. State Department report on the country's human rights record.

Among the prison abuses identified in the report are torture, beatings and "prolonged and sometimes incommunicado detention."

Sitcha said he fled Cameroon in fear for his life after assisting the families of nine boys killed by government security forces. The nine youths, who were from Douala, were arrested in January 2001 as suspects in a petty theft but then disappeared

while in custody.

Sitcha, a court bailiff in Douala at the time of the boys' arrest, said he wrote a report linking the government to their deaths and worked behind the scenes with a committee protesting the killings. The case, known as the Bepanda Nine, received widespread publicity in Cameroon.

For his asylum application, Sitcha provided letters from Cameroonians substantiating his story, including one reportedly from Father J.P. Mukengeyashi, a Jesuit priest from the Democratic Republic of Congo who was chancellor of the Archdiocese of Douala in 2001.

The letter attributed a report from Sitcha as the basis for an expose about the boys' execution that appeared in a Catholic newspaper. The letter also stated that if Sitcha returned to Cameroon it "will be the end of his life."

On Jan. 16, 2003, U.S. Immigration Judge Michael Straus granted Sitcha asylum but rescinded the decision Sept. 18, 2003, ruling that his original application for asylum was not credible.

According to court records of the September hearing, the prosecution offered testimony via telephone from an employee at the U.S. Embassy in Cameroon who said he interviewed the Jesuit priest and the attorney who represented family members of the Bepanda Nine and both denied Sitcha played a role in investigating the boys' death.

"There were no affidavits. The evidence the government used to revoke his appeal was based on hearsay upon hearsay," said Suzanne Carlson, a member of the Sitcha Defense Committee.

Carlson said committee members have asked U.S. Rep. Bill Delahunt, D-Mass., and U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., to intervene and grant Sitcha a stay of deportation, but she was not optimistic.

"What we need is a miracle," she said.