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U.S. Congress condemns arrest and detention of anti-corruption advocates in Gabon

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Washington, D.C. – In a bipartisan rebuke against corruption, several Members of Congress and leading advocacy organizations condemned the government of Gabon for the arrest and detention of five anti-corruption advocates and demanded that all charges be dropped. The men were arrested on New Year’s Eve, held initially without formal charges, and then released on January 12th. Despite their release, the charges are still pending.

In a letter to Gabon’s president El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, U.S. Representative Ed Royce (R – CA), Representative Barney Frank (D-MA) and others expressed concern about the “flawed legal procedures that led to arrest and detention... and the charges that are currently still pending against them”, and said Members of Congress are “extremely alarmed that independent Gabonese civil society members campaigning against misuse of public funds face harassment and intimidation by government authorities.” The lawyer for these advocates has been prevented from traveling from France to Gabon, making proper legal representation nearly impossible.

Those arrested include Marc Ona, Coordinator of Publish What You Pay Gabon and four of his colleagues, including several journalists. “The only crime for which Mr. Ona and his colleagues were arrested seems to be speaking out against government corruption,” said Sarah Pray, Coordinator of Publish What You Pay USA. Publish What You Pay advocates for greater transparency in the oil, gas and mining industries. “This recent action fits into a pattern of harassment and intimidation of anti-corruption actions by the Gabonese government and goes against their commitment as a participant and board member of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI).”

Gabon has said it will implement the EITI, a voluntary transparency program to publicize national information about oil revenues. A key component of the EITI is meaningful civil society participation. Marc Ona is a member of the Gabon EITI committee, along with other civil society, government and extractives companies’ representatives. “Despite their stated commitment to EITI and their----current seat on the International Board, the government of Gabon continues to harass and intimidate civil society, preventing them from doing their work,” said Bennett Freeman, member of the Boards of EITI and Oxfam America. He continued, “These arrests and incarcerations clearly contradict the government of Gabon’s commitment to EITI and to transparency more broadly.”

The Congressional letter also questions Gabon’s commitment to EITI principles and practices. “We take the EITI and its legitimacy seriously,” said the U.S. leaders, “and these arrests clearly violate the spirit and letter of the its commitment to the EITI as an implementing government.” Freeman added, “The EITI Board must consider the damage to its credibility and indeed to that of the entire initiative posed by Gabon’s continued seat on the Board and take appropriate action.”

In addition to supporting EITI, Congress is also considering legislation to improve international accountability and U.S. energy security, which received broad support prior to the close of the previous Congress. The Extractive Industries Transparency Disclosure Act would require companies registered with Securities and Exchange Commission that work in extractive industries to report how much they pay host governments for their natural resources. Similar legislation is expected to be introduced this spring. “We are working with Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate,” said Corinna Gilfillan, head of the US office of Global Witness, an anti-corruption organization and member of PWYP. “We hope that by gaining access to this information and empowering citizens to hold their governments account, the arrests of brave people like Mr. Ona and his colleagues, who put their lives on the line just by promoting proper spending of public funds, will be a thing of the past,” said Gilfillan.

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Signatories of the Congressional letter:

Representative James McGovern, Member, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Representative Edward R. Royce, Member, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Representative Donald Payne, Member, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Representative Barney Frank, Member, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Representative Gwen Moore, Member, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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