

March 18, 2024

Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 2052

Rachel E. Canty Director, Student and Exchange Visitor Program
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20536

RE: Request for Special Student Relief for Nigerian Students in the United States

Dear Secretary Mayorkas and Director Canty,

We the undersigned civil rights, immigrant rights, human rights, educational, and grassroots organizations write to urge the administration to grant Special Student Relief (SSR) for Nigeria. We are writing to bring to your attention the challenging circumstances faced by Nigerian students in the United States due to the current economic downturn in Nigeria. As representatives of the Nigerian Diaspora, we kindly request the consideration of Special Student Relief for these students who are currently navigating financial hardships.

The DHS can suspend certain regulatory requirements for F-1 students and issue **Special Student Relief (SSR)** benefits under emergent circumstances such as natural disasters, armed conflict, and financial crises. F-1 students from countries experiencing such conditions face significant economic hardship.³ SSR allows students directly affected by the crises to apply for employment authorization to work off campus, be exempt from regular student employment requirements, and reduce their course loads if needed.

The economic downturn¹ in Nigeria has had a major impact on the effects on families and individuals, including those sponsoring students studying abroad. Nigeria is currently grappling with one of its most severe economic downturns in recent memory, sparked by soaring inflation rates, which in turn have been exacerbated by monetary measures leading to a historic decline² in the value of the national currency, the naira. On Friday, February 16, 2024, the Naira plummeted to an unprecedented low of 1,524 against the dollar, marking a staggering 230% depreciation in value over the past year.

Nigerian students in the United States are grappling with the impact of reduced financial support, fluctuating exchange rates, and the overall economic challenges faced by their home country. Nigerian students studying abroad often need to pay tuition and living expenses in foreign currency. Exchange rate

¹ Elliot Smith, Nigeria battles to halt spiraling currency crisis and rising food insecurity, CNBC, March 5, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/03/05/nigeria-battles-to-halt-spiraling-currency-crisis-and-rising-food-insecurity.html>

² Chinedu Asadu, Nigeria's currency has fallen to a record low as inflation surges. How did things get so bad?, AP News, February 4, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-currency-economy-naira-tinubu-cbn-49f5686d9638e9db2ac42ae3cecd2f24>

fluctuations³ can lead to significant increases in the cost of education, making it challenging for students and their families to afford these expenses. Depreciation of the Naira⁴ decreases the purchasing power of student's funds sent from Nigeria. This can affect their ability to cover essential living costs, including accommodation, food, and transportation.

We urge the administration to grant Special Student Relief to Nigerian students, allowing for certain regulatory flexibilities. Specifically, we recommend the suspension of limitations, such as the 20-hour per week restriction on incident-to-status on-campus and USCIS-authorized off-campus employment. Moreover, considering these exceptional circumstances, students should be deemed as engaged in a "full course of study" for the duration of their employment authorization, contingent upon meeting specific minimum course load requirements.

Granting Special Student Relief would provide essential support to Nigerian students during this economic downturn, enabling them to better cope with financial challenges and continue their academic pursuits with a sense of security. We believe that such relief measures are crucial to ensuring the well-being and academic success of these students during these trying times.

We kindly request your consideration and support for this request, and we encourage the initiation of the necessary processes to review and implement the proposed relief measure. Your assistance in providing relief to Nigerian students will undoubtedly have a positive and lasting impact on their educational journeys.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to the possibility of supporting Nigerian students through these challenging times. Please feel free to contact Nkechi Ilechie at programs@nigeriancenter.org if you require any additional information or documentation.

Sincerely,

³ Nkechi Ogbonna, Why Nigeria's economy is in such a mess, BBC News, February 27, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68402662>

⁴ Macdonald Dzirutwe, Nigeria's latest devaluation may be 'turning point' in currency reform drive, Reuters, February 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-latest-devaluation-may-be-turning-point-currency-reform-drive-2024-02-05/>