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Member states of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) continue to press their case for indemnities from European nations that engaged in the transatlantic slave trade following a Dec. 9 meeting of the CARICOM Reparations Commission. This meeting followed the international attention achieved by Caribbean heads of state during their September addresses to the UN General Assembly. Both Prime Ministers Baldwin Spencer of Antigua and Barbuda and Ralph Gonsalves of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines used the UN bully pulpit to state their case. The latter will assume the rotating presidency of CARICOM in January 2014 and intends to make the reparations issue a cornerstone of his agenda.

Fourteen countries have signed on to CARICOM’s position, which will focus on the governments of the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands. Several Anglophone Caribbean nations, Haiti, and Suriname, all CARICOM member states, were the respective colonies of the aforementioned European countries. The aggrieved nations have retained the UK law firm Leigh Day, which earlier this year successively negotiated a US$21.5 million settlement for surviving Kenyan victims of the British colonial government’s repression of the Mau Mau Uprising in the 1950s and 1960s. The recent Reparations Commission meeting has also implicated the governments of Spain, Portugal, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, although whether they will also be named as defendants in the case, expected to be brought to the UN International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, is unclear.

Reparations Commission outlines rationale behind demands

The CARICOM Reparations Commission met at the Regional Headquarters of the University of the West Indies in Jamaica to conduct a progress report and lay out next steps. It noted that, since the July 2013 Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government in Trinidad and Tobago, which instructed member states to establish National Committees on Reparations, eight countries have done so: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Suriname.

Barbadian historian Sir Hilary Beckles, pro-vice-chancellor at the University of the West Indies, was appointed chair of the Reparations Commission in September. A leading voice on the matter, he is the author of Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide, published in May 2013. In February 2013, he began making a public case for reparations, speaking in Georgetown, Guyana, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the 1763 Berbice Slave Revolt.

In a press statement delivered Dec. 10 following the Reparations Commission meeting, Beckles said, "The victims of these crimes and their descendants were left in a state of social, psychological, economic and cultural deprivation and disenfranchisement that has ensured their suffering and debilitation today, and from which only reparatory action can alleviate their suffering."

The press statement identified six "broad aspects of the Caribbean conditions" that the commission has linked to the transatlantic slave trade, a race-based system of chattel slavery, and the genocide of indigenous people. These include public health crises, widespread illiteracy, inadequate cultural
institutes, deprivation of African cultural values, psychological trauma induced by slavery, and enforced backwardness in science and technology.

**European countries’ checkered recent history with slavery and reparations**

The UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, declared slavery and the slave trade a crime against humanity and suggested reparations in 2001 over the objections of the US, UK, Spain, and Portugal. The government of France followed suit the same year, with then President Jacques Chirac declaring May 10 a national day of remembrance of the victims of slavery. The National Slavery Monument was installed in an Amsterdam park in 2002, the same year as the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy was established. However, funding cuts from the Dutch government forced the institute to close its doors in 2012, a year prior to the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Dutch empire. In 2006, then Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed "deep sorrow" in an official statement of regret for Britain’s role in the slave trade and asserted that, by today’s standards, slavery was a crime against humanity.

Despite these assertions, both the UK and French governments have rejected repeated demands for reparations. In 2003, on the eve of Haiti’s independence bicentennial, then President Jean-Bertrand Aristide sent France a precise bill of US$21,685,135,571.48, deemed an adjustment of the 90 million gold francs that France required under the terms of Haitian independence.

In the current rising tide, Mark Simmonds, the parliamentary undersecretary at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, who is the minister responsible for the Caribbean, repeated his government’s position: "Do I think that we are in a position where we can financially offer compensation for events that happened two, three hundred years ago? No, I don’t and I think we’ve got to focus on where our commonalities agree and I think that is eradicating slavery as it exists today, also building on the importance of driving the economy and economic development and economic growth."

Following Simmonds’ Nov. 6 visit to Jamaica, local MP Mike Henry said, "In the first instance, we were speaking firstly of chattel slavery which was abolished by act of his parliament and it was his British parliament that paid 20 million [British pounds] under a lobby group of Plantation [sic] owners and it is his government that has not, so far, compensated the slaves in equivalent amount." The compensation paid to slave owners for loss of "property" is worth approximately £16 billion (US $26 billion) when adjusted for inflation.

**Reparations movement highlights potential for regional integration**

Since its inception, CARICOM has had a mixed record as a supranational body encouraging regional integration. While its successes include administrative support for the West Indies cricket team, the issuance of regionally recognized passports, promotion of the Caribbean Single Market Economy, and establishment of the Caribbean Court of Justice, bureaucratic inefficiency has hampered its perception in the public eye.

Natasha Lightfoot, assistant professor of history at Columbia University and a scholar specializing in slavery and emancipation studies, characterized the effort as "an important and galvanizing moment in the history of regionalization." She contrasted the reparations demand with other
issues, explaining, "Often many of the previous efforts at regionalization have been undermined by nationalist impulses and the troubles of the bigger islands having more influence because of greater land mass, population, and economic output."

However, Lightfoot continued, "In this case, there seems to be parity and a sense that all the islands have a stake in the outcome of the lawsuit, and thus I’ve heard many leaders speak out about this issue, from small and big islands."

That assertion is confirmed by the insistence of Prime Minister Gonsalves, who has raised the issue repeatedly since taking office in 2001. Inga Rhonda King, Saint Vincent’s permanent representative to the UN, indicated that at press time she has not been informed of any changes to the prime minister’s position.

While the overall thrust of the reparations demand is clear, the details of how such a settlement would be negotiated remain undetermined. "Would it come in the form of cash that governments in the Caribbean, many of whom have had their fair share of accusations of corruption, would be responsible for distributing to individuals? Or used to implement programs aimed at national/social progress? Who would control this money and who would guard the guardians?" Lightfoot asked.

With momentum growing and a possibly favorable venue at The Hague, these are questions that may soon cease to be theoretical as European governments might be forced to open their wallets.

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