

Statement

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Hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe  
(U.S. Helsinki Commission)  
“The State of (In)visible Black Europe: Race, Rights, and Politics”  
April 29, 2008

Mr. Chairman  
Distinguished Members of the Commission  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish, on behalf of my organisation- DIASPORA AFRIQUE to extend our sincere appreciation to this commission for holding this public hearing on the situation of people of African descent in Europe. I also take this opportunity to warmly thank our African-American members and sympathisers in the United States who facilitated and encouraged our participation in these hearings.

First of all I will focus my presentation on our organisation- DIASPORA AFRIQUE, and it's work in combating racism. This will be followed by a broad presentation of people of African descent in Europe : presence in Europe, movement patterns, issues, (integration), challenges and perspectives. Then I will look at anti-discrimination legislation with a particular focus on the EU race directive.

Mr. Chairman, our organisation was established to promote dynamic political, economic, social and cultural actions among people of African descent in Europe. We lay great emphasis on the past, present, and future interactions between Europe on one hand and Africa and it's diaspora on the other hand. The first concrete initiative to attain this objective was to map the African diaspora in Europe in it's contemporary political, economic, social and cultural dimensions, collect data and establish the required networks. After five years of tours of various cities in Europe, and bilateral discussions, the organisation has established contacts and networks in: Austria, Czech Republic, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

Consolidation of these networks and contacts is in progress. Local chapters have begun to be established in some countries; while the mapping exercise and data gathering for the rest of Europe is being pursued. We hope to embark on solid institution building to advocate for our rights and coordinate our political, economic, social and cultural activities in the not too distant future.

DIASPORA AFRIQUE has been active in Europe wide campaigns against racism and all forms of discrimination. We are members of the various national coordination of the European Network against racism (ENAR) and have been encouraging our networks and contacts to be part of the network. Today, there is much greater participation and visibility of people of African descent in this network .

Moreover we share information on best practices and reach out to communities of African and non-African descent. Our work on the EU race directive: holding regular consultations in the communities in France and sharing information have been of benefit to the entire community.

The growing number of hate crimes in parts of central and eastern Europe motivated us to intensify contacts with our brothers and sisters from these regions and link their struggles with those in the west. We have and still continue to encourage the participation of our brothers and sisters from Russia at the European Social Forum to give them a wider audience where they can testify about the everyday racism they face in Russia because of the colour of their skin. We equally use this forum to move the EU race directive beyond the traditional anti-discrimination and Human rights network and engage greater civil society. We organised a roundtable on the EU race directive at the 2004 European Social Forum held in Paris.

DIASPORA AFRIQUE took part in the World Conference Against Racism in Durban and we have been actively participating in the deliberations of one of the mechanisms developed out of this conference: the UN working group on people of African descent.

I will now come to the second part of my presentation which is about our presence in Europe, movement patterns, challenges and perspectives.

#### **AFRICAN PRESENCE IN EUROPE: Involuntary and Forced Migration**

Mr. Chairman, various historical accounts attest to the presence of people of African descent in Europe way before the 1500's. We will however limit our presentation to population movements pertinent to this hearing.

##### **The Transatlantic Slave Trade: Black Cargo to Europe**

(a) The UNESCO slave route project states that between 200-300,000 slaves were forcibly deported from Africa to Europe during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Their presence, inferior and degrading status and roles in European society still play a role in the way people of African descent are perceived.

We can for this period quote famous names like Oludah Equiano who played a leading role in the abolitionist movement in England and subsequent repatriation in 1787 of some of Britain's Black poor to Sierra Leone –my country of origin. Others in England include Emilio Sanchez based on our conversations with Steve Martin.

In France, Joseph Boulogne known as the 'chevalier de Saint Georges' born as a slave in Guadeloupe, came to France at the age of 7, and rose to become one of the earliest European classical musicians with African ancestry.

We had in the course of one of our « meet the brothers and sisters tours » mentioned earlier on; the opportunity to learn from Berlin based African-American Historian Paulette Reed-Andersen about German participation in the Transatlantic Slave trade as she took us on a historical tour of Berlin. 'Moorenstrasse' a Berlin street where enslaved Africans used to gather and which exists to this day in Berlin as tangible evidence of German participation and the African presence.

We hope through 'Black Cargo to Europe' a collaboration project between us and Dr. Paulette Reed Andersen's centre - to document, produce, and circulate educational material about this period of African presence in Europe.

### **Human Zoos – 1860's – 1870's**

(b) Africans were paraded sometimes naked in various European cities during colonial exhibitions to give credence to and perpetuate the prevalent racist theories of the time as well as satisfy European public curiosity. 1998 French World cup champion Christian Karambu from French Caledonia, had his great grandfather exhibited in France. These exhibitions also called the 'Human Zoos' were at times organised by former European slave merchants.

### **Bastards of the Rhineland**

(c) Between 1920-and 1923, an active and intensive campaign was launched against French colonial African soldiers stationed in the Rhineland (Germany). French Historian Jean Yves Le Naour in his book 'La Honte Noire' says African soldiers were called « monkey men of the dark continent », « human animals », 'Black hyenas'.

What began as a local protest in the Rhineland became national at first, then European and international campaign against African soldiers, as the press across Europe joined the fray to fan the embers of hatred and racism on a daily basis. Bastards of the Rhineland was how Hitler referred to offsprings of relations between African Soldiers and German women. Bastards of the Rhineland were subsequently sterilised in a bid to cleanse and purify the German race.

Negritude launched by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor during their student days in France in the early 1930's has to be seen as the Black man's attempt to reconquer his dignity as a human being against this background of heavily laden prejudice and animalisation of his essence. The intellectual production of these two giants projected in the French language to the world stage more than any other French intellectual in the last century.

Aimé Césaire joined his African ancestors on April 17th 2008. The French establishment lined up in his native born Martinique to pay their homage, respect and consideration denied to him in his lifetime because of his uncompromising condemnation of racism and colonialism.

### **Post World War II to Present day**

(d) After World war II, people of African descent from the Caribbean were brought in to help rebuild devastated Europe. The United Kingdom for instance brought in Jamaicans and other English speaking Caribbeans. At the same time the number of students of African descent at European universities increased.

As of the 60's to the early 80's more people of African descent from sub-Saharan Africa came to Europe to work, study, and or stay facilitated partly by the legislation on Family reunion. Structural adjustment in the third world, dwindling resources, instability, in the 80's and 90's created conditions for more people to leave Africa and the Caribbean for Europe. We can posit from these movement patterns that the African presence in Europe from the Transatlantic slave trade to the present day has largely been involuntary and dictated by the needs of European societies. People of African descent like other

migrants to Europe were later criminalised and their presence in Europe used as a launching pad into politics by extreme right wing forces.

### **RACISM and ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION**

The fact that we as a people have been reduced at some point in History to the status of animals means that a lot has to be done to elevate us to the status of normal human beings. Post World War II Europe having defeated Nazism with the participation and contribution of the formerly colonised had a moral obligation to combat racism and all forms of prejudice. With prejudice, racism and the supposedly inferior status of African people deeply steeped in the European psyche and without any serious attempts to deconstruct these myths, various models were proposed to create conditions for coexistence and harmony.

People of African descent were for instance firmly invited to 'integrate into European society'. This model prevailed in France and other European countries. The rising hate crimes in eastern and central Europe brought in the tolerance and intolerance models. The tolerance and intolerance models focus on individual acts and prejudice and not the collective and structural aspects of racism. Multiculturalism and Cultural diversity are the current models in fashion brought about not by public institutions but by the growing assertiveness and physical presence of 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3rd 4th etc. generation children. African-American Hip-Hop culture also plays a fundamental role in this regard.

With no serious policy programs to debunk the centuries old prejudice and myths about people of African descent, it is not surprising that we sometimes face the worst forms of discrimination in racial profiling, housing, employment, access to public and private services. Please allow us to repeat, there is to date no specific policy program in Europe aimed at combating the specific type of racism faced by people of African descent. Yet we are the elephant in the room.

We see stark evidence of the segregated status of people of African descent throughout our 'meet the brothers' and sisters tours. In 2004, about 50 men, women, and children of African descent were gutted by fire because they were living in some of the worst squalid and deplorable housing conditions inside Paris. This tragedy occurred barely two days after Katrina in New Orleans. DIASPORA AFRIQUE present on both sides of the Atlantic organised an event in Paris bringing together Katrina survivors and those of the Paris fires.

The plight of people of African descent is best expressed in the works of artists: singers, dancers, musicians, poets etc. throughout Europe in various languages. Celebrated UK dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson for instance denounces police brutality in the United Kingdom in his 'License to Kill', and young Afro-portuguese rapper CHULAZ denounces the everyday racism in Portugal.

The first piece of antiracist legislation in Europe came about as a result of the Brixton race riots in 1976 in England. Elsewhere in the rest of Europe, racism was until the advent of the EU race directive not considered as issues worthy to bother legislators. As a result, some countries had some form of legislation while others did not. It was not until around 1999 that a treaty provisions addressing the question of racism and discrimination came into existence.

The 2000 EU race directive introduced the principle of equal treatment and laid down the basics for combating discrimination based on racial and ethnic origin. Provisions of this directive covered: access to education, health, employment training, goods and services, and housing. Member states are expected to transpose the directive into their respective national laws, consult with their respective civil societies, build institutions to combat racism and discrimination, and the burden of proof shifted from the victim to the aggressor.

The directive is the most advanced antiracist and antidiscrimination legislation in continental Europe. It is not unfortunately implemented as it should be because of a lack of political will. A number of Euro MP's sensing this lack of political will launched a campaign to name and shame countries which do not properly implement the directive. The European Network Against Racism(ENAR) in a July 28th press release expressed the organisation's extreme disappointment with the failure of 14 member states to properly transpose European race equality laws into their national laws.

We believe that the race directive properly implemented will increase confidence between law enforcers and citizens. In France this could have perhaps given more confidence to the two teenagers who ended up being electrocuted in 2005 because they were running from the police just as much as the police could have stopped running after the two teenagers. We all know that the tragic electrocution of these two teenagers was the trigger for the 2005 uprisings first in the Paris suburbs then the rest of France and even to one or two neighbouring European states.

## **CONCLUSION**

We recognise the tremendous measures taken to combat racism and discrimination over the past two decades in Europe by both civil society and governments. We believe however that more has to be done to combat racism and discrimination generally.

We also recognise the efforts to focus on specific forms of racism and discrimination and we support and encourage the pursuit of such efforts .

We would like to invite European bodies in charge of combating racism and discrimination to equally focus on the specific form of racism against people of African descent. We would to end by making the following recommendations:

- Resources be allocated to organisations and individuals working on the specific issues of people of African descent
- Research institutions be set up or encouraged to develop studies on the interactions between Europeans and people of African descent
- A report on the specific form of racism against people of African descent be published in the literature of European antidiscrimination bodies such as the EUMC.
- Greater interaction between the EU antiracist bodies and the UN working group on people of African descent.

Finally, I would like to add that during the 2005 uprisings in France I was regularly interviewed by the BBC and other media groups like CNN. A BBC Journalist interviewing me for 'The World Today' programme asked if I thought the uprisings could spread to other countries in Europe. In reply I said : « As long as the deep rooted

historical injustices which gave birth to the current socio-economic segregation are not properly addressed, then the uprisings are bound to spread to other parts of Europe . Two days later incidents were reported in two neighbouring European countries.