

Caribbean nations prepare demand for slavery reparations

- ‘Our aim is to open a dialogue with European states’
- Wide range of support sought from former slaving countries

(Abridged from) *The Guardian*, March 9, 2014

Heads of state of 15 Caribbean nations will gather in St Vincent on Monday to unveil a plan demanding reparations from Europe for the enduring suffering inflicted by the Atlantic slave trade.

In an interview with the Guardian, Sir Hilary Beckles, who chairs the reparations task force charged with framing the 10 demands, said the plan would set out areas of dialogue with former slave-trading nations including the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. He dismissed claims that the Caribbean nations were attempting to extract vast sums from European taxpayers, insisting that money was not the main objective.

“The British media has been obsessed with suggesting that we expect billions of dollars to be extracted from European states,” he said. “Contrary to the British media, we are not exclusively concerned with financial transactions, we are concerned more with justice for the people who continue to suffer harm at so many levels of social life.”

The 10-point plan will be unveiled on Monday at the heads of government meeting of Caricom, the regional political and economic body. The claims are being channeled through the United Nations convention on the elimination of racial discrimination.

Among the demands made on European former slave trade nations are that they:

- provide diplomatic help to persuade countries such as Ghana and Ethiopia to offer citizenship to the children of people from the Caribbean who “return” to Africa. Some 30,000 have made such a journey to Africa and have been offered generous settlement packages, but lack of citizenship rights for their children is causing difficulties;
- devise a development strategy to help improve the lives of poor communities in the Caribbean still devastated by the after-effects of slavery;
- support cultural exchanges between the Caribbean and west Africa to help Caribbean people of African descent rebuild their sense of history and identity;
- back literacy drives designed to improve education levels that are still dire in many Caribbean communities;
- provide medical assistance to the region that is struggling from high levels of chronic diseases such as hypertension and type 2 diabetes that the Caricom reparations commission links to the fallout from slavery.

One of the most important, and most contentious, demands will be for European countries to issue an unqualified apology for what they did in shipping millions of men, women and children from Africa to the Caribbean and America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Beckles was scathing of European leaders who have issued statements of regret about slavery, including Tony Blair who in 2007, as UK prime minister, said the slave trade was a matter of “deep sorrow and regret” .

“It was disgraceful to speak of regret rather than to apologise,” Beckles said. “That was a disrespectful act on Blair’s part as it implied that nothing can be done about it – ‘Take our expression of regret and go away’ .”

The most positive response from any of the relevant European governments has come so far from Sweden, which said it has “respect for the process” on reparations emerging from the Caribbean. But the UK government has expressed scepticism, with the Foreign Office telling the Guardian last month that “we do not see reparations as the answer. Instead, we should concentrate on identifying ways forward.”

(583 words)