

The Struggle against Racism in the United States

UN Human Rights Council Holds Session on Racism in US. In the aftermath of demonstrations across the country and abroad, the international body wants to assist in the eradication of discrimination and oppression

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Global Research, June 25, 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Law and Justice](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#), [United Nations](#)

“We beseech independent African states to help us bring our problem before the United Nations, on the grounds that the United States Government is morally incapable of protecting the lives and the property of 22 million African-Americans. And on the grounds that our deteriorating plight is definitely becoming a threat to world peace.... In the interests of world peace and security, we beseech the heads of the independent African states to recommend an immediate investigation into our problem by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.” (Quote from the memorandum presented by Malcolm X on behalf of the Organization of Afro-American Unity to the Organization of African Unity second summit in Cairo, Egypt, July 17, 1964)

Nearly 56 years ago Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik Shabazz) visited the city of Cairo, Egypt for the second time within three months.

His mission was to take the plight of the African American people to the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor today’s African Union (AU), in order to solicit the assistance of the-then 33 independent nations on the continent in bringing the gross human rights violations committed by the U.S. government to the United Nations.

In 2020, the dramatic shift in mass activity and political debate surrounding the role of policing within the context of institutional racism and national oppression has come to the fore once again in the U.S. These developments prompted by demonstrations involving millions across the U.S. and internationally, along with the attacks on private property and symbols of slavery and colonialism, have drawn the attention of the modern day UN Human Rights agency which held a hearing on these issues during the third week of June. A series of extra-judicial killings of African Americans Ahmaud Abery, Breonna Taylor and later George Floyd sparked outrage which is still being manifested.

Image on the right: Burkina Faso Ambassador to UN Human Rights Council in Geneva during session on racism in the U.S.



On June 12, 54 member-states within the continental AU demanded a debate in Geneva over the events which have transpired in the U.S. surrounding the police and vigilante attacks against African Americans. A memorandum was sent to the UNHRC President Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger of Austria, signed by the government of the West African state of Burkina Faso requesting the convening of a session to discuss this pertinent issue.

In light of the unrest which spread throughout the U.S. and the world in the immediate wake of the brutal police execution of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police on May 25, Washington under the administration of President Donald Trump has failed miserably in adequately addressing the present situation. Trump in response to unrest in Washington, D.C. and other cities, evoked the Insurrection Act of 1807, threatening to deploy federal troops to areas where demonstrations are occurring to purportedly restore order.

The situation created such an embarrassing conundrum for the White House that existing and former Pentagon officials were compelled to make statements in an attempt to distance themselves from the president. Nonetheless, there have been more than 20 people killed by law-enforcement agents and National Guard over the previous month, while thousands have been beaten, gassed and detained by police.

[Even the Voice of America \(VOA\)](#), the broadcasting organ of the State Department, which has come under criticism by the Trump administration, reported on the international diplomatic maneuvering surrounding the racial turmoil in the U.S. saying:

“In a letter written on behalf of the 54 countries of the African Group, of which he is coordinator for human rights questions, the ambassador of Burkina Faso to the United Nations in Geneva, Dieudonné Désiré Sougouri, asked the body to the U.N. to organize an ‘urgent debate on the current racially-inspired human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality against people of African descent and violence against peaceful demonstrations. The tragic events of May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, USA, which resulted in the death of George Floyd, sparked worldwide protests over the injustice and brutality faced by people of African descent daily in many regions of the world,’ wrote the ambassador. ‘The death of George Floyd is unfortunately not an isolated incident,’ he wrote, adding that he was speaking on behalf of the representatives and ambassadors of the African Group.”

The Outcome of the UN Human Rights Debate

As a result of the UN Human Rights Council discussions on June 17-18 in Geneva, the body decided to conduct further investigations on the question of racism and brutality in the U.S. Such a decision portends much for the effectiveness of international solidarity related to the African American struggle.

Amid a burgeoning economic crisis directly stemming from job losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic which has impacted the U.S. more than any other country, African Americans are being disproportionately affected. This same situation prevails in regard to the infection rate for the virus itself. In cities such as New York, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles and in rural and less densely populated areas of the South and Southwest, the pandemic has taken a devastating toll particularly among oppressed peoples.

A rising antiracist and class consciousness is bound to escalate during this period of uncertainty and dislocation. Consequently, the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state will continue its efforts to suppress the demonstrations, rebellions and political demands which call for the defunding and dismantling of police.

The [UN News Service](#) said of the session in Geneva that:

“Michelle Bachelet, is to spearhead efforts to address systemic racism against people of African descent by law enforcement agencies, the Human Rights Council decided on Friday (June 19). The resolution – decided unanimously without a vote – follows a rare Urgent Debate in the Council earlier in the week, requested by the African group of nations, following the death of George Floyd in the US state of Minnesota.... The text also calls on Ms. Bachelet – assisted by UN appointed independent rights experts and committees ‘to examine government responses to anti-racism peaceful protests, including the alleged use of excessive force against protesters, bystanders and journalists.’ Overseeing the resolution, Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger (Austria), President of the Human Rights Council (14th cycle) announced that the text was ready for their consideration and asked whether a vote could be dispensed with, in light of the general consensus.”

Ambassador Sougouri of Burkina Faso described the debate in Geneva as historic. Senegalese Human Rights Ambassador Coly Seck echoed the protests in the U.S. saying “Black Lives Matter” and that racism runs contrary to the Charter of the UN.

The Future of the Struggle Against Racism in the U.S.

As recognized in the opening quote from Malcolm X’s intervention at the July 1964 OAU Summit in Cairo, the importance of internationalizing the movement to end institutional racism and national oppression in the U.S. is an important aspect of the overall effort to secure victory. Although Washington and Wall Street oversees the largest economy on the globe, the fragility and contradictory character of the U.S. capitalist system has been exposed in recent months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent financial downturn and the eruption of social unrest.

The testimony of the younger brother of George Floyd, Philonise, on June 17 before the UN Human Rights Council, spoke volumes in relationship to the nature of racism and policing in the U.S. The younger Floyd said to the Director:

“My brother, George Floyd, is one of the many Black men and women that have been murdered by police in recent years. The sad truth is that the case is not unique. The way you saw my brother tortured and murdered on camera is the way Black people are treated by police in America. You watched my brother die. That could have been me.” (See [this](#))

This process of internationalizing the African American struggle against racism is protracted. One scholar who wrote on the intersection between the liberation movements of Africans on the continent and the Diaspora emphasizes the importance of creating and maintaining these working relationships.

Image below: Malcolm X at OAU Summit in Cairo during July 1964



Prof. Azaria Mbughuni raises an important point in his assessment of Malcolm X's OAAU visit in 1964 illustrating that:

“One of the highlights of his last trip to Africa was the passing of a resolution addressing the plight of African Americans in the U.S. This resolution was passed with the assistance of the President of Tanzania, Julius K. Nyerere (1922-1999). The contact between Malcolm and East African leaders contributed to the strengthening of linkages between the struggles of African people in Africa and African Americans and to Malcolm X's own growth as a revolutionary.... Writers studying Malcolm (Malcolm X, El-Hajj Malik Shabazz) often focus exclusively on his pilgrimage to the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia and to his tours in West Africa. Furthermore, most writers dismiss the resolution on the African American struggle passed by the Second Summit of Organization of African Unity as insignificant.... The passage of a resolution on the struggle of African Americans and racism in the U.S. by the Cairo OAU Summit in July 21, 1964 was an important step in connecting the struggles of African Americans and that of African people in Africa.” (See [this](#))

Therefore, moving forward the importance of independent organizing to build a sustainable antiracist and African American liberation movement becomes paramount. Events in recent weeks have forced the international community to take notice of the ongoing social strife emanating from the racist-capitalist system.

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Featured image: George Floyd's brother addresses the UN Human Rights Council on June 18, 2020/All images in this article are from the author unless otherwise stated

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