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Congressional Hearing Held on Slavery Reparations Bill

By Askia Muhammed, Final Call

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Washington (FinalCall.com) -- For the first time ever, the U.S. Congress officially studied the institution of slavery, its legacy, as well as U.S. efforts to address it and its consequences, during hearings by the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties on Dec. 18.

It was the first time H.R. 40, the proposal to establish a Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act has had any kind of a hearing, even though the legislation has been introduced every year for almost two decades by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), the new chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

"For over 19 years, I have introduced H.R. 40 -- not to spark controversy or promote division -- but to direct attention to a historical wrong that warrants substantial consideration," Mr. Conyers said when he gaveled the session to order. "With an H.R. 40 commission, this nation could come closer to racial equality and understanding. Slavery is a blemish on this nation's history, and until it is addressed, our country's story will remain marked," he continued.

The racial disparities, which exist throughout the society are ample evidence, Mr. Conyers insisted, that the vestiges of slavery remain: the Black high school drop-out rate is 50 percent compared to 23 percent for Whites; national average scores in math, science and reading for Black 17-year-olds are comparable to the scores for White 13-year-olds; the poverty rate of Blacks, at 24 percent, is twice the national average.

H.R. 40 is "necessary for this nation," Mr. Conyers insisted. "We are here today to help folks open their minds as they consider supporting H.R. 40. I truly believe that today's hearing will start the national dialogue," which can lead to the formal establishment of a slavery commission, he said.

"This hearing looks not just to the past, but to the legacy of our own history of slavery as it continues to affect race relations and inequality in present day America," agreed committee member Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.). "It is our duty to ask the difficult questions and to face up to our responsibilities to remedy the ongoing injustice of slavery that remains a part of our society."
The outright call for reparation payments, as well as for a commission to study reparations as a possible remedy for the victims of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, was supported by scholars, activists, church leaders, and even members of Congress.

"The horrors of the slave trade have yet to be addressed and the passage of time makes it even more difficult for us to respond to one of the most tragic, brutal, and for some, financially beneficial periods in American history," Harvard Law professor Charles Ogletree testified.

"I support the call for reparations for the descendants of the millions of slaves who toiled in this country for decades, and who never were compensated for their labor," said Prof. Ogletree.

"This was a momentous occasion here today, to provide an opportunity to address H.R. 40, which would establish a commission to look at the era of enslavement and whether it has impact on present day African Americans," Kibibi Tyehimba, co-chair of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA), told The Final Call. "This is about getting the truth out. We were very happy to be here today, so we can begin that process."