

OAS Opens New Office on Blacks with Brazilian Money

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With a renewed call for a hemispheric anti-racism convention to be in place sometime in the near future, the Brazilian government, February 28, made a special contribution of US\$ 65,000 to help fund the first year of operations of the newly-created Organization of American States' (OAS) Special Rapporteurship on the Rights of People of African Descent and on Racial Discrimination.

The establishment of the rapporteurship under the OAS' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) was formally announced February 25, as the Commission continued its three-week 122nd regular session that ends March 11.

Dr. Douglas Martins, Executive Secretary of the Special Ministry for Racial Equality in Brazil, presented the donation to Clare K. Roberts, the Commission's new chairman, an Antigua and Barbuda jurist.

"This initiative marks a historic development in hemispheric cooperation that is very beneficial to us all," Martins remarked about this new rights office, which has Roberts as its first rapporteur.

He noted that Brazil, like several other nations of this hemisphere, still has to do more to promote racial equality and fight discrimination.

Dr. Martins commended the Commission for its historic move in creating this special office aimed at combating all forms of discrimination and promoting tolerance in the Americas while attending to the rights of people of African descent.

The Brazilian state is now well on that path, he said, citing as concrete examples the creation of the Ministry to which he is assigned, as well as this latest contribution towards the Commission's history-making initiative on Afro descendants in the Americas.

"It has been shown conclusively that in countries where there is a persistence of unequal distribution of wealth, the Afro descendants are the most affected," the IACHR Chairman stated as he outlined the special rapporteurship's mandate to stimulate, systematize, reinforce and consolidate IACHR action concerning the rights of people of African descent as well as racial discrimination.

"Afro descendants in the Americas have historically suffered from racism and racial discrimination," he said, noting as well a historical "invisibility of this population along with the lack of information."

Among its core objectives, the special rapporteurship will work with OAS member states to: generate awareness of the states' duty to respect the human rights of afro-descendants and work towards the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination; analyze the current challenges that confront countries of the region in this area; formulate recommendations designed to overcome the obstacles and identify and share best practices in the region with respect to this matter; and monitor and provide any technical assistance requested by member States in the implementation of the recommendations in national law and practice.

According to Dr. Roberts, a former Antigua and Barbuda attorney general, this historic moment in the IACHR's life is extremely significant.

"It demonstrates that the Commission can react to the requirements of its constituents," he argued, crediting the government of Brazil with leading the way on the initiative to create the special rapporteurship.

He acknowledged efforts by non-governmental organizations, academics and international bodies to document the existence of the afro-descendants and the causes and consequences of their exclusion.

Regarding antecedents to this new OAS rapporteurship, Roberts identified key developments in the international arena of human rights protection such as a regional conference that was held in Chile in preparation for the World Conference against Racial Discrimination, Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in South Africa.

He said the Chile meeting "provoked the governments of the Americas to advance substantively toward the establishment of a conceptual framework in order to raise visibility of the Afro descendants, recognize the persistence of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and racial intolerance and set forth a guide to fight social exclusion and racial discrimination in our region."

In the Declaration and action plan from that Chile meeting, the states recognized that "the identity of the Americas cannot be disassociated from its multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural and pluralist nature. They also recognized that that racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance still persist in the Americas and that racism and racial discrimination continue to cause suffering, disadvantage and violence."

In addition, the states pledged to "redouble their efforts and to reassert their commitment to eradicating racism, in order to improve human wellbeing and eradicate poverty."

OAS