



**Commemoration
of the
First International Day for People of African Descent**

***Theme: Reaffirming the Commitment to the People of African Descent
for their Recognition, Justice, and Development***

August 31 to September 4, 2021

San Jose and Cahuita, Costa Rica

Opening Session of the High-Level Forum

September 1, 2021

8:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

**Venue: National Center of Culture
Theatre 1887
San Jose, Costa Rica**



OPENING SESSION PROGRAM:

Official Statements of the International Day for People of African Descent:

- Dr. Natalia Kanem, Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- Dr. Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR)

Opening Remarks:

- H.E. Epsy Campbell Barr, First Vice President of the Republic of Costa Rica
- Harold Robinson Davis, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

(Moderator: Priscilla Scott, Head of Office, First Vice President of Costa Rica)

Keynote Speaker:

Ms. Dorothy M. Davis

Congressional Black Caucus Institute (CBCI) Global African Diaspora Initiative
Representative to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Closing Remarks:

- H.E. Ambassador Fatima Kyari Mohammed, Permanent Observer of the African Union to the United Nations
- H.E. Odeno Kwafu Akoto III, King of Akwamu, Ghana

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FINAL KEYNOTE SPEECH:

Title: Justice for All: The Power of Sustainable Advocacy

Keynote Speaker:

Ms. Dorothy M. Davis

ECOSOC Designee for the Congressional Black Caucus Institute Global African
Diaspora Initiative

- H.E. Epsy Campbell Barr, First Vice President of the Republic of Costa Rica
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- H.E. Odeno Kwafu Akoto III, King of Akwamu, Ghana
- Harold Robinson Davis, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Members of the Diplomatic Corps.

Distinguished Dignitaries in the audience.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

All Protocols Observed.

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What a joyous celebration we had last night: the first International Day for People of African Descent! It was spectacular! What an honor to be with you at this time!

I stand before you today as a proud woman of African Descent. I, also, stand before you as the United Nations Economic and Social Council or, for short, ECOSOC, designee for the Congressional Black Caucus Institute. The Congressional Black Caucus Institute is a non-governmental organization and the policy advocacy and leadership training arm of the Congressional Black Caucus.

As a member of ECOSOC, we stand on the shoulders of African Americans who were part of the founding American delegation at the signing of the United Nations Charter in San Francisco in 1945 and at the formation of what has become the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the guiding document of the Human Rights Council.

So on behalf of the Congressional Black Caucus Institute, its Chairman, Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, its Executive Director, Vanessa Griddine-Jones, and African Americans of all walks of life across the world, I would like to begin by thanking the Government of Costa Rica and, particularly, First Vice President Epsy Campbell Barr, for initiating the resolution adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on December 28, 2020, proclaiming yesterday, August 31, as the International Day for People of African Descent. I would also like to thank the 52 Member States for their support of this resolution.

To further underscore collective support of this Day, I am happy to inform you that Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California introduced a resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives proclaiming August 31 as International Day for People of African Descent in the United States of America.

It's ironic that this commemoration coincided with Voters Rights marches across the United States this past weekend in recognition of the 58th Anniversary of the March on Washington and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "*I Have a Dream*" speech.

What an achievement we have collectively reached!

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Look how far we have come in our centuries “*long walk to freedom*” to paraphrase Nelson Mandela. We found a way to “*make a way out of no way*” through physical, psychological and spiritual bondage to reach this mutual moment.

Let’s thank our ancestors for their fortitude, resilience, innovativeness, ingenuity, vision, brilliance, and determination to “*keep hope alive*”- in the words of Reverend Jesse Jackson - through the generations.

Our collective walk toward freedom is one step closer to our vision of the future. This Day firmly plants the journey of people of African Descent in the soil of posterity.

Every year going forward, the celebration of this day will remind us to recognize and respect the diverse heritage, culture, and contribution of people of African descent. It will help us recognize the development of integral societies and promote respect for human rights. It will also remind us to honor the fundamental freedoms of people of African descent.

Let’s start with Recognizing the power of sustainable advocacy:

While we cheer for the names we know, let’s remember the untold waves of African men, women, and children who were ripped from their homes and families and indiscriminately shipped across the Atlantic Ocean from the “*Doors of No Return*” of Goree Island of Senegal, Cape Coast Castle of Ghana, and Ouidah (Why-dah) of Benin...the most important embarkation point for the enslaved in the region of West Africa between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries.

While crossing the Middle Passage, they died of hunger, disease, depression, fear, cruelty, and more. Some chose freedom through death. It is those whose bones still lay at the bottom of the ocean whom playwright August Wilson refers to in the dialogue between his characters Aunt Ester and Mr. Citizen in his award winning play “*Gem of the Ocean*”....



“They coming across the water. Ten thousand hands and feet coming across the water. They on their way. I came across that ocean, Mr. Citizen. I cried. I had lost everything. Everything I had ever known in this life I lost that. I cried a ocean of tears. Did you ever lose anything like that Mr. Citizen? Where you so lost the only thing that can guide you is the stars. That ‘s all I had left.”

Those who survived the Middle Passage and arrived on the shores of unknown lands were stripped of their cultures, religions, languages, traditions, currencies, foods, family names, livelihoods, social status and familiar environment. Their talents, experience, wisdom, leadership, and skills were used to build the wealth and empires of strangers in strange lands. As their remuneration, they were forced to live in inhuman conditions of unconscionable depths.

Those were our enslaved ancestors.

Colonialism

But we also recognize that while the enslaved were being snatched from Africa to the Americas, Europe was introducing colonialism to Africa. Through random and selfish acts of redesigning the continent into newly constructed countries, they ignored the centuries-old cultures and socio-ecosystems our ancestors had established.

At the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco in 1945, Liberia, Ethiopia and South Africa were the only non-colonized African countries to sign it. However, South Africa was operating under the apartheid system. Haiti and the Dominican Republic were the only non-colonized countries from the Caribbean to sign it. Yet, the underground fight for freedom from colonialism across Africa was already afoot.

The history of colonialism is well documented. I only want to highlight that the initial godfathers of the independence movement of Africa were President William V. S. Tubman of Liberia and His Royal Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

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In January 1953, then-Prime Minister of the Gold Coast Kwame Nkrumah made an official visit to Liberia at the invitation of President Tubman. My parents had arrived in Liberia a few months earlier on their first tour of duty as a foreign service family. Since my father, Griff Davis, was the first AudioVisual Advisor at U.S. Embassy/Monrovia, President Tubman arranged with the first African American U.S. Ambassador Edward R. Dudley for my Dad to go to Accra and accompany Prime Minister Nkrumah and his entourage on the ship back to Monrovia. My Dad officially documented the historic trip and visit of Kwame Nkrumah to Liberia in photographs and a story in Ebony magazine.

When Ghana celebrated its first Independence Day on March 6, 1957, my father was sent from his post in Liberia by U.S. Information Agency to be the official photographer for the U.S. delegation to the Independence Day ceremonies in Accra led by then-Vice President Richard Nixon. Congressman Charles Diggs from Michigan was part of the delegation. (He later became the Founding Member and first Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus as well as chair of the House Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs.)

It was during a reception in Accra that my father took the iconic photograph of the first meeting between Vice President Nixon and Martin Luther King, Jr. flanked by their respective wives: Patricia Nixon and Coretta Scott King. It was at that time that Nixon invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to meet him in Washington, D.C. The Kings had just completed the Montgomery bus boycott a few months earlier. They were invited to attend the Independence Day celebrations by Ghana's first President Kwame Nkrumah.

By May 25, 1963, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was formed as an intergovernmental organization for the purpose of ridding the continent of the remaining vestiges of colonization and apartheid and to promote unity and solidarity amongst African States. Having accomplished its primary goal with the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, the OAU transformed into the African Union in 2002.

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Today, we honor the men and women who were involved in the fight for Civil Rights and against colonialism and apartheid.

In the United States, this includes the names of men, women and children we shout out when we say Black Lives Matter. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Amadou Diallo, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland and countless others who should be here today celebrating with us.

Let us not forget to also cheer for everyday people who have been foot soldiers in this war like our own family members: our Great Grandma and Great Grandpa; our Grandma and Grandpa; our Mom and Dad; our Aunties and Uncles; our brothers and sisters; our neighbors down the street.

They are all part of the historical lineage of unsung heroes and heroine brigades.

This has been and continues to be our **collective legacy of sustainable advocacy**. I challenge you to help build this legacy going forward. We owe it to our future generations if we are to eradicate enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism, apartheid such as racism and discrimination.

Global African Diaspora Statistics

Today, as many as 1.6 billion people identify themselves as part of the worldwide African Diaspora, including as many as 200 million in the Americas. As many as 67 percent of residents of the Caribbean are of African descent. As many as 46.8 million people in the United States identify themselves as Black or African American, and have continually made important contributions to the political, economic and socio-cultural development of the United States.

International Decade for People of African Descent (2014-2024)

Over the last six years, we have been living in the International Decade for People of African Descent, as proclaimed by the General Assembly in 2014. The international community has continually recognized people of African descent whose human rights must be promoted and protected. In fact, the President of the



General Assembly hosted the Midterm Review of the International Decade for People of African Descent on July 22.

The Ark of Return

We began this critical decade by unveiling *The Ark of Return* on March 25, 2015, a permanent memorial to honor the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Lee secured the U.S. government contribution for the completion of the *Ark of Return*. The date also marked the *International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*.

On that blistering cold day, Jamaica's former Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller joined Secretary-General Ban ki Moon, then-U.N. General Assembly President Sam Kutesa of Uganda, Ambassador Tete Antonio (the predecessor of Ambassador Mohammed as the African Union Permanent Observer to the U.N.), Member States and the late former first African American Mayor of New York City David N. Dinkins in the formal program to unveil the memorial. I stood in the audience witnessing this historic moment.

Designed by Haitian-American architect Rodney Leon, the memorial stands at the Visitors entrance to U.N. headquarters in New York City for the world to perpetually **remember and honor** the more than 18 million victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade forced from Africa to the Americas, including the Caribbean and Europe.

Acknowledge the Tragedy is the first element of The Ark of Return, a map highlighting the African continent at the center of the slave trade, illustrating the complexity and impact at a global scale.

The second element, *Consider the Legacy*, features a full-scale human replica carved out of black Zimbabwean granite to represent the spirit of the men, women and children who lost their lives.

And the third element, *Lest we Forget*, offers a reflecting pool for visitors to honor the memory of the millions of souls lost.

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The *Ark of Return* is a “tribute to the courage of enslaved people, abolitionists and unsung heroes who helped end the oppression of slavery.”

The installation is considered to be one of the most important contributions of the entire International Decade for People of African Descent.

And today, we add another significant contribution by celebrating the first International Day for People of African Descent.

Durban Declaration and Program of Action

The Permanent Memorial was an outgrowth of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action of the 2001 *World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance* held under the tenure of then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Durban, South Africa. The following U.S. Congresspersons attended the *World Conference on Racism* as observers: the late Congressman John Conyers, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, and then-Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney. I, too, attended the World Conference on Racism as a member of the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) delegation.

According to the Durban Declaration, “The Conference agreed that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity, and should have always been so. It was further agreed that slavery and the slave trade were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity, especially in their negation of the essence of the victims. The Conference also recognized that colonialism had led to racism and caused suffering and that its consequences persisted to this day.”

African and Diasporan Identity

Five years before the 2001 *World Conference on Racism*, then-Deputy President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa under the presidency of Nelson Mandela gave a seminal speech entitled “I Am An African” on the occasion of the passing of the new constitution of South Africa. With the end of apartheid, this historic moment represented the full independence of the entire African continent. I listened to his

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speech while sitting in a cab in Pretoria that day. It was spellbinding! He ended it by saying:

“This thing that we have done today, in this small corner of a great continent that has contributed so decisively to the evolution of humanity says that Africa reaffirms that she is continuing her rise from the ashes...

Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now!

Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace!

However improbable it may sound to the sceptics, Africa will prosper!”

The African Union later adopted that phrase “***I Am An African***” as the slogan for their global communications campaign.

For me, the 1921 poem, “***The Negro Speaks of Rivers***” by Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes powerfully captures the African diaspora’s core umbilical cord relationship to Africa in spite of the variety of traversed rivers.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

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*I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The Griot as African tradition

One African tradition that survived the Middle Passage was that of the griot. Those who arrived on new shores brought with them the memory of what freedom had been in their native country. It was a gift that kept on giving through the generations. I believe they embedded those stories of freedom in the minds and souls of the enslaved to instill hope in future generations.

Ebony magazine and the tributaries of the Black Press served as the modern day Griot and internet during the Jim Crow, colonialism and apartheid eras. They documented and shared the stories of the U.S. Civil Rights movement with those of the Independence Movement in Africa. Former liberation movement leaders turned Heads of State of African nations confirmed that premise. Today, it's the "in real time" immediacy of the internet via the proliferation of cell phones.

COVID19 Pandemic and Racism Pandemic

That's how we globally watched the continuously revolving and expanding cycles of COVID-19 and defiant Black Lives Matter demonstrations as they mushroomed across the U.S. after each police brutality incident. The collage of these, at first, seemed to be random acts of violence being met with the extreme retaliation of the police. Yet, the repetition of these incidents eventually revealed to the world a systemic pattern of racism and racial injustice. George Floyd's elongated murder over 9 minutes and 26 seconds on May 25, 2020, ignited the suppressed global rage stemming from the residue of legacies that started with slavery.

As is stated in the resolution entered into the U.S. Congressional Record yesterday by Congresswoman Barbara Lee, this was the point when "the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the intersectional and compounded forms of racial discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion experienced by people of African descent."

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It goes on to say “the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other African Americans in the United States catalyzed people around the world to protest racism and prompted a global reckoning on racial justice.”

So, this brings us to the issue of Justice:

In response to George Floyd’s murder, CBCI spearheaded a joint public statement of outrage against police brutality on Juneteenth 2020 with our fellow African American ECOSOC Consultative status member organizations. We were really encouraged by the expression of solidarity exemplified by the Africa Group of the Human Rights Council and the extraordinary global multiracial outrage and demand for justice.

CBCI welcomes the release by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet of the report on systemic racism and police brutality against Africans and people of African descent at the hands of law enforcement around the world after **examining 62 countries including the United States**.

We further support her global call to action at the time of the report’s release, by saying that there is “an urgent need to confront the legacies of enslavement, the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and successive racially discriminatory policies and systems, and to seek reparatory justice.”

We also support the following resolution **introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Congresswoman Barbara Lee proclaiming August 31 as International Day for People of African Descent in the United States**, “Be it resolved, that the House of Representatives:

1. Celebrates the goals and ideals of the first International Day for People of African Descent, particularly the principle that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and have the potential to contribute constructively to the development and well being of their societies”;

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2. Condemns any doctrine of racial superiority as scientifically and empirically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust, and dangerous to democracy everywhere and calls for its rejection, together with theories that attempt to determine the existence of separate human races;
3. Strongly condemns the continuing violent practices and excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies against Africans and people of African descent and condemns structural racism in criminal justice systems in the United States and around the world;
4. Acknowledges the transatlantic slave trade as one of the darkest chapters in our human history and upholds human dignity and equality for the victims of slavery, the slave trade, and colonialism, in particular people of African descent in the African Diaspora;
5. Commits to pursue a legislative agenda to eliminate the persistent racial inequities here in the United States in education, health care, housing, jobs, wages, Social Security and veteran benefits, land ownership, financial assistance, food security, voting rights and the justice system;

And, stands in solidarity with people of African descent across the diaspora against systemic racism and supports the transformational agenda for racial justice and equality as identified in the Systemic Racism Report, and implemented through the subsequent Human Rights Council Resolution informally referred to as the “George Floyd Resolution” and the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent.”

The urgency to implement the recommendations of the global Systemic Racism Report extends to each of our national levels. It is now **our** mandate! In the United



States, Members of the Congressional Black Caucus are doing so in the following ways:

- **Congressman Bennie Thompson of Mississippi** is the Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus Institute. He is also the current Chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee and was recently appointed Chair of the House Select Committee on the January 6th Insurrection. He is fighting white supremacy and white supremacists.
- **Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas**, is on the House Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security Committee. She has led the charge in moving H.R. 40, a bill to establish a commission to study and develop reparation proposals for African Americans through the legislative process.
- **Congresswoman Barbara Lee and Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey** sponsored a resolution to establish a national Commission on *Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation*. This commission will educate and inform the public about the historical context for current racial inequality.
- **Congresswoman Terri Sewell (SUE-WOOL) of Alabama** was the lead sponsor of the *John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* that recently passed the House of Representatives. It restores critical protections to voting rights.
- **Congressman G.K. Butterfield of North Carolina**, is Chairman of the House Administration's Subcommittee on Elections.
- **Congresswoman Karen Bass of California and Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey** sponsored the *George Floyd Justice in Policing Act*. It addresses a wide range of policies and issues regarding policing practices and law enforcement accountability.

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As for the area of Development:

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the racial, health and gender disparities of our societies crashing to the surface of our collective consciousness. It has also crystallized our global inter-dependency as human beings and as nations. Its domino effect across all of the Sustainable Development Goals has severely undermined our previous successes and revealed the frailties of our development systems. It has forced all of us to become innovative, resilient, and patient against all odds as we meet each new and interwoven challenge in this very fluid environment.

We all know that there is a huge divide in the availability and distribution of vaccines for everyone globally. Africa and the Caribbean are among the hardest hit by COVID. While addressing these issues at the national level, the Congressional Black Caucus is keenly aware and committed to pushing the U.S. government and its allies towards greater access as well as partnering with the African diaspora in finding viable solutions.

Climate change is also further complicating and devastating our way of life. The recent earthquake in Haiti, the devastation of Hurricane Ida in New Orleans and the fires in California, the floods in Europe and across the world are signs of the frailty of our planet.

We are all trying to find solutions to ever more complex problems. Here are a few examples of the initiatives being made by the Congressional Black Caucus in partnership with the African Diaspora:

- **Congresswoman Barbara Lee** (CA-13), *Chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs*, and **Congresswoman Karen Bass** (CA-37), *Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights*, joined by an additional 13 Congressional Black Caucus members, sent a letter calling on the Administration to donate and urge other countries to donate 100 million additional vaccines to African nations.

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African nations have received 19.7 million U.S. vaccine donations – yet only 2% of Africans have been fully vaccinated for COVID-19. Africa has the highest COVID-19 death rate in the world and COVID-19 infections are rapidly increasing due to the emergence of the Delta variant and a lack of vaccines and public health resources.

- **Congressman Gregory Meeks of New York**, is the *Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee*. He is working with congressional colleagues including **Representative Yvette Clarke of New York, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Congresswoman Maxine Waters** of California and many others, to aggressively push the United States to lead in providing access to vaccines for African and Caribbean countries.
- **Congresswoman Maxine Waters of California** is Chair of the House Financial Services Committee.

In conclusion:

We gather here today as the residue of all these disparate routes people of African Descent have traveled over the centuries. It has been and is a very personal and painful journey for all of us.

We together must recommit to realizing the values and objectives of our ancestors in each day of our lives.

Let us recognize the power of the diaspora as being the modern day Underground Railroad of Africa and each other across the diaspora in the same way that Harriet Tubman used the Underground Railroad to free enslaved people.

CBCI established the Initiative for the Global African Diaspora to provide context for the diaspora and the world about the realities of people of African descent

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within the United States. CBCI is the platform for the voices of African Americans within the African Diaspora at the U.N. in support of the Sustainable Development Goals. In that racism impacts all the Sustainable Development Goals, CBCI strives to educate how it contributes to disparities and works towards eradicating those disparities in the United States and through partnerships across the African diaspora.

CBCI has Special Consultative membership status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). CBCI is also a member of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations or, for short, (CoNGO) along with the National Council of Negro Women, the NAACP, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority to name a few.

In this way, our organizations continue the seminal legacies of those that were members of the founding American delegation at the Signing of the UN Charter in 1945. They were: Ralph Bunche, known as the father of peacekeeping”, W.E. B. DuBois and Walter White, founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Given their close friendship, we believe that Eleanor Roosevelt consulted with her friend, Mary McLeod Bethune, as she shaped the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into fruition.

Let us find ways to work together and build the world we all want as stated in the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

CBCI looks forward to collaborating with other civil society organizations in implementing the Systemic Racism Report, the George Floyd Resolution, the establishment of the Permanent Forum for People of African Descent and recognizing the 20th Anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action on September 22 at the national, state and local levels. (www.cbcinstitute.org)

So, as we celebrate the first International Day for People of African Descent with great joy and enthusiasm, let us remember that we are the dream of our ancestors. We have the responsibility of carrying their baton forward while educating our

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children and the generations to come. This is our commitment that we must never stop fulfilling.

Let me leave you with the groundbreaking and wise words of Maya Angelou, “*Still I Rise*”:

Still I Rise

BY MAYA ANGELOU

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.

I rise
I rise
I rise.

Thank you for including CBCI in this historic moment.

La luta continua!