

Written Statement of Dr. Carlyle G. Corbin, International Advisor on Governance

on the subject of the International Decade for People of African Descent

Committee on Culture, Historic Preservation, Youth & Recreation

Thirty-first Legislature of the Virgin Islands

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Thank you for this opportunity to provide a statement in favor of the resolution on the subject of the *International Decade for People of African Descent*. I wish to congratulate Senator Myron Jackson, sponsor of the legislation, for submitting this proposal for consideration by the 31st Legislature.

As outlined in the legislation, the member countries of the United Nations unanimously proclaimed the period 2015-2024 as the *International Decade for People of African Descent*, and one year later approved an extensive plan of action to carry out programs at the national, regional and international level under the theme "*People of African Descent: recognition, justice and development.*"

The legislation outlines the earlier steps that have been taken by the international community leading up to the proclamation of the International Decade including the proclamation of 2011 as the *International Year for People of African Descent*, and the relevant activities undertaken worldwide during that period.

The International Decade also builds on the ongoing work of the U.N. Human Rights Council, its *Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent*, and its *Working Group on the effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action* which was created as an outcome of the *2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance* held in Durban, South Africa in which the U.S. Virgin Islands enjoyed observer status. I had the honor to represent the Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands at that important conference which was the genesis of the discussions culminating in the adoption of the International Decade in 2013 (*the U.S. Virgin Islands Statement to the 2001 Durban Conference is annexed to the for ease of reference*).

Consideration of the legislation today follows the important annual commemoration at United Nations Headquarters in New York only two days ago on March 25th of the *International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. This year's activities included the unveiling of the *Permanent Memorial to Honour the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, entitled '*The Ark of Return*,' which was designed by Rodney

Leon, an American architect of Haitian descent. The Permanent Memorial pays tribute to the courage of enslaved Africans, abolitionists and unsung heroes, while promoting greater recognition of the worldwide contributions made by Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora.

It is also noteworthy that the legislation is being considered by this body a few short days before the annual observance of the transfer of jurisdiction from the Kingdom of Denmark to that of the United States. This year's Transfer Day should provide us with the opportunity to reflect on the evolution of the territory as we emerged from centuries of enslavement through to the 1733 revolution on St. John, the 1848 Emancipation Insurrection, the 1878 Fireburn in St. Croix, the 1892 Coal Workers Strike in St. Thomas, continued Danish colonial rule, and the transition to U.S. jurisdiction in 1917. These important dates in our history are dutifully included in the preamble of the legislation on the International Decade for People of African Descent.

At this juncture, it may be useful to consider that full emancipation did not come with the abolition of slavery which, in many respects, merely perpetuated a refined form of what had previously prevailed. Thus, the subsequent decades of post-emancipation Danish colonialism, and incremental gains in limited self-government since the transfer to the U.S. in 1917, have yet to yield a full measure of political equality and democratic governance, and our political status remains crucial unfinished business.

Accordingly, the legislation on the International Decade, in many respects, offers us an opportunity to intensify our focus on the contributions of the numerous Virgin Islands patriots and leaders - well known, little known and unknown - who have contributed to the Virgin Islands, to the Caribbean, to Africa, to the United States and beyond. All have nudged us along the way towards full and complete emancipation - but we are not there yet.

The legislation on the International Decade allows us to be creative in developing sustainable programs to heighten our awareness of ourselves, and the sacrifices, challenges and contributions of the ancestors who survived the horrors of the Middle Passage, and who were the victims of this most horrendous crime against humanity.

The legislation on the International Decade provides us a chance to join with the international community over a full decade in devising sustained programs of education and enlightenment about the struggles, successes and failures of those who came before us in order that those who govern today - and those who will govern tomorrow - can stand firmly on the shoulders of their predecessors.

The legislation on the International Decade would also serve as an opportunity to acknowledge the many positive achievements of so many of our young people whose positive efforts are not given their due consideration, and are all too often overshadowed by misplaced focus on more sensationalist events occurring in our community.

Overall, the legislation on the International Decade could serve as a useful example for a broader framework to facilitate a renewed focus on the participation of the territory in the wider international system which characterized the official outreach of the territory in earlier years. As an example, an associate membership status in the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) - as is enjoyed by the British Virgin Islands and other Caribbean territories - could be most useful in providing scope for participation in cultural, educational and scientific programs including those which are being developed to implement the plan of action of the International Decade.

Serious and sustained collaboration with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), for example, would enhance our opportunities to engage the region in programs being planned for the International Decade, and in the involvement of programs designed for young people of the Caribbean.

Accordingly, this legislation serves as a window to a broader, more global perspective. It is a perspective which our society and especially our young people require if the Virgin Islands is to successfully compete in this increasingly globalised world. It is for these reasons that I support the present legislation on the International Decade for People of African Descent, and stand ready to assist in the development of relevant programs in the years ahead.

Thank you.