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International Law and Empowerment of HBCUs addressed at Side-Session Event at the UN in Geneva

On May 7th, just prior to the May 11th UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of the United States, an African American delegation held a side-session at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, titled **Empowering Black Colleges: International Law, African American Development and Self-determination**. The session elaborated the impact on Black Education in the United States, and in particular the case for the empowerment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities as a historic legacy, domestic entitlement and the international minority right of the African American people in the face of US Department of Education policies, cutbacks, rollbacks and state discrimination against HBCUs.

The side-session was held in Room XXIII of the Palais des Nations, between 1:00-3:00, on May 7, 2015. Speakers were

Dr. Farid I. Muhammad, Professor Emeritus, East-West University, **Prof. Vernellia Randall**, Professor of Law, Dayton University, **Mehmut Sukru Guzel**, 2014 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, **Dr. Edwina Harris Hamby**, Vice President Fisk University, and **Dr. Alfred de Zayas**, UN Independent Expert. The paper of **Attorney Standish Willis** was presented in his absence. **Barrister Majid Trambo** moderated the session.

Dr. Muhammad addressed how HBCUs are the instruments of African Americans' self-determination, and provided empirical information derived from his series of surveys of African American support for self-determination. **Professor Randall** discussed how the school-to-prison pipeline is the result of laws, policies and practices that push students from school and into the prison system. **Mehmut Sukru Guzel** addressed the self-determination rights of African Americans. **Dr. Hamby** outlined the historical legacy of HBCUs and their contribution to the civil rights movement and to local communities. **Atty. Willis'** paper pointed out how African American communities were denied their human right to education with the imposition of school closures and privatization, in violation of instruments of international law which he extensively detailed. **UN Independent Expert Alfred de Zayas** spoke at length on self-determination rights from the perspective of international law.

Strong international interest in the event was demonstrated by the attendance by officials from 12 States, as well as UN and NGO representatives. Subsequent to the event and in the days that followed, IHRAAM Delegates met with numerous state officials to further pursue the issues raised.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are officially defined as "any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans..." and with the exception of four publicly funded HBCUs, all were founded after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and the Civil War ended. They have traditionally been economic drivers of African American communities, addressing not only the educational needs of students, but creating and sustaining a professional and business elite with strong community ties and commitment to community development and the unique African American cultural heritage. They currently represent about 3% of colleges in the U.S. but enroll 12% of all students who identify as black or African Americans. They produce 23% of all Black college graduates, and confer a striking 40% of African American STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine) degrees, and a full 60% of engineering degrees. They also educate half of the country's African American teachers and 40% of all African American health professionals.

It is estimated that, due to various US policies which have disproportionately impacted **HBCUs, their numbers will drastically decline** from the 107 institutions presently existing to only a few elite institutions. Already the colleges have been severely impacted, losing some \$160 million as the regulations governing federal student loans to parents hit African American families hard.

Significantly, the **US Department of Education has just acknowledged that its 2011 changes to the Parent Plus Program did indeed damage HBCUs.** See "[ED Data Verify Damage Done to HBCUs](#)". The Report found that "PLUS loan amounts declined substantially at HBCUs ... and they were not fully replaced by other federal aid," as department officials previously claimed. The report's authors found that "At HBCUs the share of families with PLUS loans declined 46 percent, and the dollar amount of PLUS loans fell 36 percent." This was more than the decline experienced by other institutions.

The US Universal Periodic Review comes not just at a time of crisis for HBCUs, but also at a time of public outrage at the serial killings of innocent Black men by police habituated to impunity, and not least, of African American realization that the [expected benefits of having a Black President in office have not been forthcoming](#).

It also comes at a time of startling new strides forward in the struggle to empower HBCUs: [the creation of an HBCU Congressional Caucus](#), This new HBCU Congressional Caucus has brought together Black Democrats and Black Republicans. There are 40 Black Members of Congress who have signed up for it. The **Bipartisan Congressional HBCU Caucus** mission is "to highlight and address unique challenges that HBCUs face; and to make sure their needs are heard and recognized on Capitol Hill. The Bipartisan Congressional HBCU Caucus is an official caucus approved by the Committee on House Administration in the 114th Congress. It is co-chaired by Congresswoman Alma Adams (D-NC-12) and Congressman Bradley Byrne (R-AL-1)."

The **International Human Rights Association of American Minorities (IHRAAM)**, an international NGO in consultative status with the United Nations since 1993, is sponsor of the side-session, and lead sponsor among 7 other cosponsors, of an [Alternative Report](#) on the issue to the UN HRC submitted in September 2014. The disastrous Parents Plus loan program and other deleterious DoE policies, cutbacks, rollbacks and state institutional favoring of predominantly white institutions over HBCUs were factors addressed in the IHRAAM Alternative Report.