

UN panel discusses race, poverty and power

By Saeed Shabazz -Staff Writer- | Last updated: Dec 17, 2009 - 10:12:57 AM

UNITED NATIONS (FinalCall.com) - The United Nations marked the 61st anniversary of Human Rights Day on Dec. 10 with celebrations that spanned the globe from a special session of the parliament in Timor-Leste, a tiny South-East Asian nation that won its independence from Indonesia, to a panel discussion at UN headquarters on "Race, Poverty and Power."

On Dec. 10, 1948 in Paris 48 nations adopted the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" which states in the first paragraph of its Preamble "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice in the world."

In Geneva, Switzerland, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay from South Africa declared in a speech that "discrimination is still rampant 61 years after the Declaration."

In New York, the president of the UN General Assembly, Libyan diplomat Ali Treki stated: "Millions of human beings continue to fight a daily battle against discrimination to gain access to education, health services and decent work."

This discussion is an excellent opportunity to raise awareness and share information, said United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, during opening remarks before panelists' presentations. "Those of us who have power must make it a priority to end poverty and racism," he said. But, the first-term secretary-general added, it is important to understand that "individual citizens have power too—the power to fight for equal rights."

The four-member panel was moderated by Craig Mokhiber, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; with participating panelists Ejim Dike, director Human Rights Project's Urban Justice Center; Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, director Democratic Governance Group of the UN Development Program; Gay McDougall, UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues and Elsa Stamatopoulou, chief of the Secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Panelists agreed governments must fix "wrong-headed" public policy and end passive neglect such as national versions of history that deny the identity of some citizens.

However, it was Ms. Dike who put a face on those in the U.S. most plagued by racism and discrimination after Ms. McDougall asked how policy makers were dealing with the issue of African descendents in America who are locked out, disenfranchised, marginalized, and questioned the role racism played in the lack of development of their communities.

"One in four Blacks in NYC are living in poverty; for Whites it is one out of every 11," Ms. Dike stated. "Half of the families living below the poverty level, have at least one member working. But in the Black and Latino communities the unemployment rate is

rising higher. Before the recession, 50 percent of Black men in NYC were unemployed, while 73 percent of Black teens are unemployed," Ms. Dike noted.

She told the audience her next statistic was the most telling concerning the issue of race and development: "In NYC one-third of Blacks and 40 percent of Latinos have been forced out of the middle class," said Ms. Dike.

Low homeownership rates perpetuate less wealth and lack of opportunity and rising high school dropout rates perpetuate the cycle of unemployment, Ms. Dike continued. Poverty and the lack of income translate into powerlessness; and the marginalize of communities of color, she said. "This is a result of policy choices by those in charge, which they have subsequently adopted from the days of slavery and Jim Crow," Ms. Dike said. "The problem of race disparities is a societal problem."

The Urban Justice Center, according to Ms. Dike wants government to design programs targeted for public works, and equal employment opportunities to reverse the problems.

"The role of anti-racism advocates is to hold our own governments accountable," Ms. Dike told The Final Call. She also commented on the importance of taking part in the panel discussion. "It is incredibly important that we have the opportunity to discuss the problems here at home, because too often at these forums all that is discussed are the problems in other countries," she said