

COMMENTARY

Conditional justice as good as no justice

Special to Sentinel-Voice

In the past few weeks 13 families got what they had hoped was good news that their beloved family member would be released from prison. But when they read the fine print, they found that the releases were conditional and that the good news probably was not so good at all.

It must have seemed like a cruel joke and one more insult from our government.

These were the families of the 16 Puerto Rican political prisoners who are serving sentences, incredibly long sentences, in U.S. federal prisons for crimes such as seditious conspiracy, possession of an unregistered firearm or interstate transportation of a stolen vehicle.

One was sentenced to 90 years, others were given 50 or more years in prison despite the fact that none of these leaders of the Puerto Rican independence movement was directly involved in any injuries or deaths. Most have already served 19 years, with one serving 25 years.

Like Nelson Mandela, whose prison cell President Clinton looked out of on his trip to Africa, these men and women have been imprisoned on a charge of seditious conspiracy because they actively worked against the government they believed had illegally taken over their land. In the Puerto Ricans' case, that government was the United States and, again like the Mandela's African National Congress, these independentists have waged a long struggle against their colonizers.

In the 1950's a Puerto Rican was convicted of plotting to

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By Bernice Powell Jackson



kill President Truman and several others stormed the U.S. Capitol, wounding five congresspersons. They were all pardoned by President Carter in the 1970's, after also serving long sentences.

Now President Carter has joined many others, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Coretta Scott King, Rev. Jesse Jackson, many religious leaders and several Democratic congresspersons and Puerto Rican elected officials and leaders from a broad spectrum of political beliefs in calling for the unconditional release of the Puerto Rican political prisoners on humanitarian grounds and as a political act.

But while President Clinton agreed that the sentences received by these Puerto Rican prisoners were far out of proportion to the nature of the crimes they were convicted for, and despite his visit to Robbins Island with President Mandela, whose unconditional release the U.S. had called for, he found

himself unable to commute the sentences of these political prisoners unconditionally.

Instead, his commutation requires them to renounce the use, attempted use or advocacy of the use of violence and would include strict travel and associational restrictions. It seems to ignore an earlier joint statement by the prisoners and submitted to a congressional committee that they intend to integrate themselves into the civic and legal political process in their communities and that they understand that times have changed and declared their willingness to participate in a truly democratic process to resolve the status of Puerto Rico.

Indeed, some argue that President Clinton's commutation of the incredibly long and harsh sentences of these political prisoners is not really a commutation at all. It merely releases them from prison to serve the remainder of their terms in their communities.

There is no official word yet whether the Puerto Rican political prisoners will accept the conditions which President Clinton has placed on them. But many see these conditions as demeaning and insulting.

Maybe President Clinton should consult his friend President Mandela about whether he would have found such conditions acceptable and such a commutation humanitarian.

If President Clinton really believes these sentences were unduly harsh and out of proportion to the crimes, then he should just commute the sentences of these political prisoners and indicate that nearly two decades in prison is long enough.

Buford Furrow types given tickets to terrorize

Earl Ofari Hutchinson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

In November 1998, White supremacist Los Angeles shooter Buford Furrow pleaded guilty to assault with a deadly weapon in Seattle.

This was a felony offense yet he received a hand slap sentence of five months probation. This, even though it was known that he had cavorted with the Order which has the well-deserved reputation of being one of the nation's most murderous White supremacist groups and makes no secret of its maniacal hatred of Jews and Blacks.

Furrow then skipped off to Los Angeles to send his "wake up call to America to kill Jews."

But he is hardly a unique case.

In April, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold delivered their own terror-filled wake up call with their murderous rampage at Columbine

High School in Colorado. The next month Benjamin Nathaniel Smith did the same with his murder spree in Illinois and Indiana.

Like Furrow, these young men had prior run-ins with the law. Smith flirted with a violent hate group while Harris and Klebold were fascinated by them. There were blazing signs that these men were hate-filled ticking time bombs, but still they were left to roam free.

This kid glove treatment of young White males, who are potentially grave menaces to society, stands in glaring contrast to that of the treatment of young Black males. According to the annual FBI Uniform Crime Report, far more young White juveniles are arrested for serious crimes than young Blacks.

Yet, far more Blacks than Whites are tried, convicted, and imprisoned than Whites. And, more Black than White juvenile offenders are tried as adults. There is absolutely no evidence

that men such as Furrow are routinely stopped, searched and harassed by some police agencies because they fit a racially-stacked and crime distorted profile.

Also, many law enforcement agencies should be asked about how they deal with men such as Furrow. When they are arrested on weapons charges or found in possession of banned or deadly firearms what charges are filed against them? How vigorously are they prosecuted? If the charges are subsequently dropped are their guns returned to them? If they are repeat offenders and are finally convicted of serious crime, how many actually receive and serve their prison sentences?

How many are given lesser sentences such as, probation, community service, fines, house arrest or electronic monitoring? It's obvious that prison is not in the cards for far too many Furrows.

The federal government and many state

authorities are not much help in closing the loopholes that would take violent hate mongers like Furrow off the streets before they launch their deadly rampages.

Under the current federal Hate Crimes Act 12 states submitted no data to the FBI on such crimes in 1997, and a dozen states still have no laws on the books targeting racially-motivated crimes. Even after Furrow turned himself in, and despite his known extremist ties and hate filled statements, authorities still seemed hesitant to prosecute his assaults as a hate crime.

The problem of tracking hate is aggravated by police agencies. More than half of them still have no hate task force units or specific procedures for dealing with such offenses.

The passage of the Hate Crimes Act of 1998 was supposed to end their confusion, inertia, and head scratching. It would increase

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U.S. not only country owing reparations to Africans

Dr. Conrad W. Worrill

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At the recent conference of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA), the organization announced it is not only demanding reparations from the U.S. government but all the countries and institutions that participated in the slave trade.

Reparations for African people in the United States is commonly defined as, "the demand for the U.S. slaves and their descendants, from the government of the United States of America and its individual White men, women and children, and all other of the free structure and their heirs, following in

interest, inheritance, use of benefits through succession, for payment and return for restoring and taking back, for damages, hurt, injury, losses and other wrongs, in the forms of money, goods, services, land treaty, tax exemptions, releasing political prisoners, technological transfers, meaningful education and formal apologies."

It has been thoroughly documented that for a period of over 400 years enslavement robbed Africa of her best and strongest, women, men and children. They were put in chains like goods and chattel and transported to the Americas to plant cotton and sugar cane to export to Europe for the

Industrial Revolution.

The demand for reparations should be expanded to include all slave trading nations such as Portugal, Spain, France and England. Along with the United States, the countries listed above were truly slave trading nations and African people should not let them off the hook.

Hopefully, as the worldwide momentum around reparations intensifies, N'COBRA will take the lead and collaborate with other displaced African peoples so we can unify our efforts, strategies, resources and expertise.

The Africa Reparations Movement was formed in the

United Kingdom in 1993. Its formation was the direct result of the Conference On Reparations held in Abuja, Nigeria in 1993. The conference issued a declaration called The Abuja Proclamation "which called for a national reparations committee to be set up throughout Africa and the Diaspora."

It is important to review some of the key points in the Abuja Proclamation:

— Africans are convinced that the issue of reparations is an important question requiring the united action of Africa and its Diaspora and worthy of the active support of the rest of the international community.

— Africans believe the damage sustained by African people is not a "thing of the past" but painfully manifests itself in the damaged lives of Africans from Harlem to Harare, Guinea to Surinam.

— Africans are aware of historic precedents in reparations, ranging from German restitution to the Jews for the economic tragedy of the Holocaust to the question of U.S. reparations to Japanese-Americans for internment by the Roosevelt Administration during World War II.

— Africans are cognizant of the fact that compensation for injustice need not necessarily be paid only in

capital transfer, but could include service to the victims or other forms of restitution and readjustment of the relationship agreeable to both parties.

— Africans are convinced that the claim for reparations is well grounded in international law.

— Africans urge the OAU to establish a legal committee on the issue of reparations.

— Africans call on Africa and Diaspora groups already working on reparations to communicate with the Organization of African Unity and establish continuing liaisons."

In this regard, as Pan- (See Reparations, Page 17)