

CBC eyes expanded technology, clout

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — U. S. Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick (D-Mich.), the new chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, says her role will be to galvanize the clout of CBC constituents to help Democrats win the presidency in 2008 — in part, by using technology.

"That's what it's all about. It's about 2008," says Kilpatrick in an interview. "We represent 40 million Americans in 26 states. So, that's an awesome database. We've got a great opportunity. And the technology is available. So, that will be my claim to fame. We've got a lot of work to do and we're



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ready to do the work.

Kilpatrick, who succeeds Rep. Mel Watt (D-N.C.), says the 43-member CBC will now be strengthened using cutting-edge technology.

"We want to establish a national Internet, webcast, podcast, blog system where

we are able to talk to each other — elected and appointed officials — as well as leaders and our natural allies, our national organizations and our ministerial groups," she said.

"We've got to maintain Democratic control of the

House [the Senate] and [gain] the presidency; thereby you get your issues and your public policies and your resources back. We've had 12 years of an America with Republicans in charge — loss of jobs, big deficits, interest rates high, you name it, healthcare system in collapse. All of that has got to be changed and you have to have the presidency to do it. We've got 24 months to do the jobs, and I'll be working diligently to make sure that that happens."

The Congressional Black Caucus, in its 35th year, has grown to a new level of influence. Three of its members now chair major House committees: Michigan Con-

gressman John Conyers (the Judiciary Committee); New York Congressman Charles Rangel (Ways and Means) and Mississippi Congressman Bennie Thompson (Homeland Security).

Amaya Smith, spokesperson for the Democratic National Committee, says beyond the CBC chairs and subcommittee chairs, key members are becoming powerful players in the presidential race because of their influence. That includes Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.), the new majority Whip.

"He is a member from South Carolina which is now an early primary state," said Smith. "A lot of people are going to talk with him and

have his ear over the next several months.

South Carolina, with a Black voting-age population of 31 percent, is the second primary in the country and the first primary in the South. The state is highly coveted for its potential Black voting power. Black voters in South Carolina make up 40 percent of the state's Democratic electorate, the nation's largest contingency of Black Democrats.

The courting has already started.

"I guess over the last year, I've talked to every one of them whose names have been mentioned," said Clyburn. He said he had an
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Diamonds

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tional as having the "least corrupt government in Africa."

Simmons said that while some nations are still using conflict diamonds, which finance rebel movements, the majority of diamonds on the market are conflict-free, including his products.

The Kimberley Process has encouraged about 45 nations to voluntarily follow strict regulations designed to weed out conflict diamonds from international commerce.

According to the Kimberley Process, its participants account for 99.8 percent of the global production of rough diamonds.

How those numbers are perceived troubles Mel Foote, executive director of Constituency for Africa, and Amnesty International's Bonnie Abaunza.

"I think there are some other dynamics at work out

there that deals with Africa and natural resources and it deals with oil, it deals with gold, it deals with timber, it deals with humans, us, slaves," Foote said.

"This has been the story of Africa for hundreds of years. To isolate diamonds and say 'Oh, we're going to get that one under control,' I think is somewhat naive."

Foote said while diamonds are important to the "hip-hop crowd and White people... it don't deal with most of us." Instead, he believes American investors need to take a closer look at Africa's oil.

"Right now we get 10 percent of our oil from Africa. That number is expected to go to 25 percent by 2010. So if we want to continue to drive our cars, we're going to need a new kind of relationship with Africa," he said.

As a human-rights advocate, Abaunza said she has to

be hopeful that 100 percent of the world's diamonds will eventually be "conflict-free," but agreed the numbers can be misleading.

"There's a lot of corruption, but when I hear 98 percent, 99 percent, the problem that we have with these numbers is how do you then justify that number with \$22 million coming out of the Ivory Coast? Millions coming out of eastern Congo, illicit diamonds, maybe anywhere from 50 million coming out of South America from Venezuela and Brazil (that) make it into the international marketplace? We try and quantify a number like that, it's a bit disingenuous because then you've got these hard numbers and \$23 million translates into a lot of human rights violations," she said.

Simmons agreed the Kimberley Process could stand to be improved.

"There's still issues," he said. "I'm not saying it's good, it's perfect. It's just better than it was and a lot, lot better."

The movie "Blood Diamond" has also raised the issue of conflict diamonds and its effects on the people of Africa. The story is set in Sierra Leone during its devastating and gruesome civil war in the 1990s. It opened last week, days after Simmons' return from Africa and announcement.

Simmons disagrees with the portrayal of the diamond industry in the film starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Djimon Hounsou, and had strong words for the film's producers.

"Warner Brothers owes

Africa an apology. They're spreading a message at the end of the day don't buy diamonds. Warner Brothers owes an apology for not making it clear enough that's not the Africa today," he said.

"If you're going to spend \$200 — and something million on a movie, you ought to know at least what the climate is today... I don't mind people trying to make it better, but I mind people giving

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the misinformation out there."

Abaunza, who is the director of Artists for Amnesty, a division of Amnesty International that works specifically with entertainers and the entertainment industry, said the movie won't cause the boycott of diamonds Simmons fears.

"I don't think either the studio or the filmmakers misrepresented anything and here's why. The movie is in a historical context. It is clear in the movie this is about the war in Sierra Leone—a decade long war in the 1990s."

She said of the numerous screenings to diverse groups including college students, Amnesty members and others, viewers understood that.

"The people that I have spoken to and the reaction I'm getting is people aren't interpreting this as this is the current situation in Sierra Leone. So they understand

that it's framed in a historical context and that was always the intent of the movie. I don't believe that there is an apology necessary."

Abaunza said prior to his trip, Amnesty International helped brief Simmons and his delegation that included Benjamin Chavis, the CEO and president of Simmons' Hip Hop Action Network.

She said Simmons was briefed about other African

past to visit Africa, said he hopes Simmons' new involvement with Africa won't be a phase.

"I'm not knocking Russell because I think he's doing a lot of good things. But from where I sit, I don't see him fully engaged. I see him engaged in the periphery of it. I see him engaged because right now everybody's talking about it. But six months from now, if we don't do something to deepen that involvement, he won't be involved at all," Foote said.

Like Abaunza, Foote thinks Simmons' should visit the more turbulent areas, but he's pleased Simmons is bringing attention to the cause.

"I'm glad people like Kanye West and Russell Simmons are shedding a little light. Because whenever they speak, lots of the young, hip-hop crowd listens to them. So we need that to happen but we need them to get further involved and further engaged in the effort to help Africa and that goes beyond the flavor of the month."

This season, when purchasing that diamond for someone special this season, Abaunza said there's a lot to think about, but first, ask jewelers to see certificates that prove they are Kimberley Process certified. She said most major jewelers can provide them.

"If they can't or they won't, take your business elsewhere. There are plenty of jewelers who are well-informed and want to do the right thing and have the certificates, and those are the people who should be getting the business."

Morial

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the table. In assessing the significance of Sharpton's light-colored suit in a sea of dark ones at a recent city hall news conference, *Washington Post* fashion critic Robin Givhan summed up his role in the aftermath of the Bell shooting very aptly. "Sharpton's butterscotch-colored suit was almost a visual taunt, a signal to onlookers that his presence should not be construed as an indication that he has become part of the team — despite the group portrait. He has agreed to play by the rules, but do not underestimate him as an adversary," she wrote.

African-Americans may have come to dinner at the mayor's office but that doesn't mean they're obliged to stay until dessert — or even past appetizers. Bloomberg must back his conciliatory efforts up with actions — not just words. If the New York Police Department cannot investigate this incident without bias and emotion, the U.S. Justice Department must intervene.

Marc H. Morial is President and CEO of the National Urban League.