

Opening business gateway to West Africa

By Harry C. Alford
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Sometimes you find the answer you have been looking for in places you never thought. Our challenge was to find a system that would make it easy and less risky for our viable business owners to explore the business opportunities of West Africa and, at the same time, improve our cultural interchange and discover our lost heritage. Let's face it, we African-Americans have been removed from our African roots for centuries and we are only touching the surface in the attempt to reconnect.

Our approach to doing business in West Africa has been even less sophisticated. Too many of us go it alone and either become confused, swindled or just plain unsuccessful. It doesn't have to be like that if we get ourselves organized.

It took me by much surprise when officials from the Canary Islands came to the National Black Chamber of Commerce office and introduced a program they were starting for all interested American entrepreneurs. For the last 30 years, they have been cultivating business relationships with all of the West African countries — from Morocco to Equatorial Guinea. I have come to find out that not only have the Canarians been able to do ongoing business with West African na-

tions, they have established technical assistance offices throughout this part of the continent. They have done their homework and have established an infrastructure that gets you to the "deal table" fast and effectively.

The cons and swindle games have been eliminated; they know where the real deals lie and know the games to avoid. The Canary Islands Chamber of Commerce knows West Africa as well as anybody, and now they are looking to African-Americans to join them as partners. We have come to find this inviting and quite timely.

We Americans have developed a deep passion to find our West African roots. Ads on national television promote the use of swabbing your mouth and sending in the sample to be examined to determine where your DNA comes from, such as Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, etc. From there, we want to journey and find the people from which we come.

There is one big problem there. West Africa lacks hotel and travel facilities to meet the demand of 40 million American Blacks wanting to visit the homeland. The Canary



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Islands has developed an answer to that. Over the past 30 years, they have built more than 100,000 beautiful hotel rooms along their beaches. The Islands have a population of 2 million and are host to more than 12 million tourists per year, most of them Europeans.

The Islands are located 50 miles off the coast of Africa, just south of Casablanca. The scenario is this: you can enjoy the warm and beautiful environs of the Canary Islands and shuttle to and from Senegal, Ghana, Cameroon and other destinations. Members of the Canary Islands Chamber of Commerce have also built free-standing hotels in Senegal and other places along the coast to meet the growing demand of Americans wanting to visit the Mother Land.

For too long, African businesses have been strapped with the dependence of shipping their goods all the way to Amsterdam, Brussels and England before they could be relayed to the United States. This is costly and time consuming. To answer this call for a change, the entrepreneurs of the Canary Islands have built two modern deep water ports open for business. They are ready to ship goods from there directly to ports such as Miami, Balti-

more, New Orleans and Houston in the United States.

They have also developed trucking lines that go into the interior of West Africa and can supply or pick up goods deep into the "bush" at affordable rates and reliable service. Americans who seek to import cold storage produce such as pineapples, bananas, etc. now have a process they can rely on. The dependable players have been identified and the process for setting up has been reduced immensely.

Flying to West Africa can take up much time and may force you to journey by way of London or Amsterdam. From the east coast of the United States, a direct flight to the Canary Islands is only six hours. When we get the travel demand up, we can have even more flights. Once in the Canary Islands we can set up within their beautiful hotels and shuttle to and from our West Africa destinations.

The entrepreneurs of the Canary Islands anticipate meeting African-American entrepreneurs seeking joint ventures in West Africa. The National Black Chamber of Commerce is forming a strategic alliance with them and the "mystery" of doing business in Africa will be history. The best is yet to come.

Harry C. Alford is Co-Founder, President/CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, Inc.

Farrakhan set for last address

DETROIT (AP) - Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan is heading into what's billed as his final major address Sunday, and some Muslims are wondering if the fiery orator — now slowed by poor health — will try to repair old divisions between his movement and mainstream Islam.

Farrakhan's scheduled appearance at Ford Field, home of the NFL's Detroit Lions, will be his first since ceding leadership last year to an executive board because of illness.

The 73-year-old Farrakhan was released last month from the hospital after undergoing a 12-hour abdominal operation to correct damage caused by treatment for prostate cancer. A statement from the Nation at the time said Farrakhan "doesn't see himself coming before the public on such a major stage as we are preparing in Detroit."

He might, however, honor lesser size engagements.

The event will be a homecoming of sorts for the Nation of Islam movement, which promotes Black empowerment and nationalism. It was founded in Detroit by Wallace D. Fard in 1930.

Fard attracted Black Detroiters on the margins of society with a message of discipline, self-improvement and separation from Whites,

who he said were inherently evil because of their enslavement of Blacks.

Farrakhan rebuilt the movement in the late 1970s after W. D. Mohammed, the son of longtime nation leader Elijah Muhammad, moved his followers toward mainstream Islam.

His closest brush with the political mainstream probably came in 1995, when he attracted hundreds of thousands of Black men to Washington for the Million Man March.

Now, back in the Nation's birthplace, there's speculation about what Farrakhan's last major address could tackle. The topic of Sunday's speech, capping a series of meetings that start Friday, is "One Nation Under God."

"We have been told that Minister Farrakhan is going to be making a big announcement at this meeting," though it's not known what he will say, said Dawud Walid, executive director of the Michigan branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

The Nation and orthodox Islam diverge on several key beliefs. While mainstream Islam holds that Muhammad was God's last prophet, Nation of Islam had taught that God came in the form of Fard decades ago in Detroit.

Farrakhan has downplayed many of those teachings in recent years,

adopting some mainstream Muslim traditions and embracing W. D. Mohammed on stage in 2000 after years of discord. Mohammed also visited Farrakhan recently during his recovery, a Nation of Islam official said.

Farrakhan has credited his mollified outlook to what he called a "near death" experience related to his prostate cancer, which he began battling in 1991.

A sign of his softer approach came in 2005, at a Washington rally for the Millions More Movement. Unlike the Million Man March a decade earlier, which was for Black men only, the rally was open to men and women of all races.

"In the course of his career, I have to say, the external gaze of others generally has not been at the top of the list of what he's worried about," said Melissa Harris-Lacewell, a professor of politics and African-American studies at Princeton University. But, "it's late in his life, he's ill. There are questions of legacy. All of that tends to soften a leader, encourages them to think beyond self-aggrandizing choices."

In Detroit, some Blacks who practice mainstream Islam say a shared history and personal ties with the Nation have united the groups in worship and work. Mitchell Shamsud-Din, a founding

member of the orthodox Muslim Center in Detroit who runs its community service programs, is like thousands of Detroit-area Muslims who came to orthodox Islam through the Nation.

"There's a friendship and brotherhood between our two groups," said Shamsud-Din, whose projects include Nation of Islam volunteers.

"We work with Christians, and they believe Jesus is God," he said. "Why wouldn't we work with a Muslim brother who has another difference?"

Nation leaders won't say how many members the movement, now based in Chicago, has locally or nationally — though the Council on American-Islamic Relations and others have estimated it has between 10,000 and 50,000 followers in the U.S. and no more than 1,000 in southeastern Michigan, according to Sally Howell, a University of Michigan researcher who specializes in the local Islamic and Arab-American communities.

Jimmy Jones, a religion professor at Manhattanville College, who is Muslim and studies Islam, was skeptical about Farrakhan's willingness to change. While the Nation of Islam has adopted some mainstream Muslim practices, it remains essentially a race-based movement, he said.

Thousands in N.C. march for change

By Melde Rutledge
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RALEIGH, N.C. (NNPA) - If the North Carolina General Assembly decides not to heed the call of the thousands who marched to the state's Legislative Building on Feb. 10, N.C. NAACP President William Barber avows that the group will return to the state's capital each year until their demands are met.

"We're not just marching to gather for one day," Barber said. He spoke to reporters during the press conference at Memorial Auditorium in Downtown Raleigh prior to Saturday afternoon's Historic Thousands on Jones Street event, dubbed "HK on J."

"We're not here just to scream at the darkness," he added. "This is the beginning of a fresh movement in the state of North Carolina."

"It's about unity." Scores of North Carolinians from across the state answered the N.C. NAACP's call for unity that weekend in Raleigh, arriving in cars, vans and buses.

Those in attendance took part in the mass gathering to point out their disapproval of state lawmakers' alleged lack of concern regarding the needs of the poor and working class citizens of North Carolina.

As a superior court judge in North Carolina for nearly 20 years, Milton F. Fitch Jr. said, "Folks on Jones Street have stopped listening to people."

The People's Agenda, a 14-point list of demands that was presented officially to the state's General Assembly that weekend, is what many demonstrators consider to be a key resolution to help the poor and working class in North Carolina.

"We really need to set an agenda, stick to it and achieve goals," said Munir Ali, a resident of Durham who came to the event with his grandson, Dane.

The People's Agenda includes: increasing the state's minimum wage to a "livable wage," providing affordable healthcare, "lift every Historically Black College and University," redress state discrimination of hiring and government contracting, supply affordable housing for low income citizens, abolish the death penalty and man-

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