

Europe urged to recognise Slavery as Crime

Historians and anti-racism campaigners are to urge the countries that oversaw and profited from the Atlantic slave trade to recognise it as a crime against humanity, opening the way for reparations.

Next week, activists are to send a letter to the leaders of Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain asking them to recognise the trade as an historic injustice a century and a half after it ended.

They have already convinced France to do so.

The European Memorial Foundation for the Slave Trade will launch the appeal at the French Senate on May 10, backed by the French historian Louis Sala-Molins and John Franklin from the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington.

"There are several reasons for this, including its symbolic value, to restore the memory of this crime against humanity," Karfa Diallo, chairman of the foundation, told AFP.

"There's also a question, shall we say, of justice," he said.

The continuing problem of racism in a Europe that now has an ethnically diverse population that could be precisely traced back to the 16th and 17th century texts justifying and codifying slavery, he argued.

"Racism and discrimination persists in Europe. Young people of Caribbean and African ancestry are victims of it. And we know, historians have shown this, that racism was born in this story."

Diallo's group was founded in the former French slave port of Bordeaux in 1998.

It has found allies in other cities of Western Europe that grew wealthy on the profits of the trade, from Bristol in England to Porto in Portugal.

And now it wants other European states to follow France in recognising that the slave trade was not just a historical tragedy, but a criminal act that has enduring social consequences in Africa, the Caribbean and Europe's melting pot cities.

France passed a law in 2001 recognising slavery as a crime against humanity and the then president Jacques Chirac declared May 10 as a national day of remembrance for the victims of slavery.

"If we accept that it was a crime, then there should be reparations. All crimes deserve compensation for victims and punishment for perpetrators," argued Diallo.

"We'd like to see the creation of an international memorial fund, that would support a School of Memory. A fund managed by the United Nations," he said.

The school would teach the history of the slave trade to descendants of victims and slavers alike, he added.

While European nations now accept that slavery was an injustice, governments have fought shy of offering compensation. Some Europeans argue it is impossible to put a price on the suffering of slaves long dead and of regions of Africa that weren't then even states.

But Diallo argued that Germany's reparations of victims of the Nazi Holocaust had set one precedent, while some payouts have already been made in the case of slavery -- but to the slave owners, not their slaves.

"Europe owes a part of its capital to those that suffered," he said. "So far, only the slavers have been compensated. In all the colonies, when slavery was abolished, states decided to compensate."

"For as long as there are no reparations to the descendants of the victims, we remain in a situation of extraordinary injustice, which is that we paid off the slavers. That's hard to accept in the 21st century."