

**Remarks of the Honorable Alcee L. Hastings
Co-Chairman, United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**United Nations Minority Issues Forum: Second Session
Session 8: Concrete Steps to Advance Minority Political Participation and to Build Capacity
of Minorities to Participate Effectively**

November 13, 2009

Good afternoon. I am Congressman Alcee Hastings from the United States. I am honored to be here today with a number of my colleagues from the US Congress, including the Chair of this Forum - Congresswoman Barbara Lee. I am pleased that this week's event offers the opportunity for us to work together in the international arena on an issue of great importance - minority political participation.

I am pleased that the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall invited me to present on a minority political participation effort I recently initiated that I believe will be useful for today's discussion in developing recommendations for this forum's final document.

As the Chair and co-Chair the US Helsinki Commission over the past few years, I have been tasked with the responsibility of monitoring and supporting 56 European and North American countries' efforts to uphold the Helsinki Accords and related commitments, including fostering equal rights and combating intolerance and discrimination.

A series of hearings we held in the US Congress on these issues including existing inequalities and discrimination faced by Black Europeans and other visible minorities throughout the OSCE, led to a call for action. Instrumental to those hearings were the testimonies of UN representatives Gay McDougall and Joe Frans that assisted in identifying patterns of concern in the OSCE region.

Following those hearings, I introduced the first US bill calling for transatlantic government partnerships to combat racism and discrimination and partnered with UN Working Group of People of African descent head Joe Frans and current and former EU Parliamentarians Harlem Desir, Claude Moraes, and Glyn Ford to begin an initiative that would support the needed involvement of minorities in the policymaking arenas to effectively address these issues. I'm happy to see a number of my colleagues here today.

The resulting event was the "Black European Summit: Transatlantic Dialogue on Political Participation." The Summit took place over two days in April (15-16) at the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium. For the first time a small group of political and intellectual minority leaders from more than ten countries exchanged information on barriers to political participation and the roles of minority

policymakers in representing minority interests, including promoting equal rights in the United States and Europe.

Following the event, participants adopted the Brussels Declaration which addressed the importance of and strategies for increasing racial and ethnic minority political participation. Materials on each of these initiatives have been made available today.

What did we learn? Whether a Parliamentarian, Mayor, or City Counselor, we had much in common.

First, the majority of our political and legal systems do not accurately reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of our societies.

Second, we have often not been sufficiently included in the development and/or implementation of government policies, even when the stated goal was to combat racism and discrimination.

Third, institutionalized processes are often at fault, yet, despite stated commitments to democracy, there continues to be a lack of political will from government, political parties and other actors to include us.

Fourth, the lack of political knowledge of our communities often made it difficult to garner the necessary support to effectively address these issues.

We noted that often times, political participation was defined as whether minorities had the right to vote or be elected. While this is one aspect of participation, there are many others.

Policymaking via obtaining positions in the government and/or with political parties, grassroots advocacy, and an understanding of the political process such as how laws are drafted are also of great importance.

We discussed simple solutions governments, political parties, and non-governmental organizations can employ such as advertising employment opportunities in minority communities, requiring that at least a percentage of persons interviewed for a position are minorities, and providing minority fellowships and internships for teenagers and college students in Parliament, government agencies, and other organizations are initial steps.

Financing degrees for minorities in relevant fields such as law, international relations, political science, or even economics is another. Tapping minorities in the private sector for public-private policy initiatives such as the development of energy and trade policies are also necessary.

We determined that government agencies, parliamentarians, and other government officials can also foster strong relationships with minority communities through educational information sessions on political rights and even regular face to face meetings that allow minorities to be in on the decision-making of policies that impact them. This could be small regular monthly meetings or even town hall sessions.

The need for increased support for minorities currently in political careers was deemed essential. Mentorship opportunities for current elected officials and those seeking elections, establishing support networks such as our Congressional Black Caucus, and having procedures in place to address workplace discrimination were noted.

In discussing the realm of possible solutions, we agreed to make the initial Summit an annual event and to continue the dialogue. Moving forward we plan to address the following issues, which are also detailed in the final Brussels Declaration:

1. Political education for minority communities, including advocacy,
2. The development of physical and electronic support networks for minority elected officials,
3. Youth and community outreach, including the development of targeted professional development and hiring strategies in the political arena, and
4. Opportunities for self-organization and other empowerment initiatives.

Importantly, we believe these efforts must be applied to all levels of national, regional, and local government to ensure that our societies are fully participatory.

In the interest of time, I will conclude here. I would urge that many of the concrete steps I detailed be included in the Final Document of this forum. I look forward to answering any questions regarding the Summit, US initiatives, and other thoughts on concrete strategies regarding minority political participation during the discussion.

Thank you.