



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the U.S.

## THE STRUGGLES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF AFRO-VENEZUELAN

In recent years, Venezuela has made unprecedented progress in combating the historical legacy of racism and recognizing the importance of its African heritage through government initiatives such as the following:

- The Council for the Development of Afro-Descendent Communities (2012).
- The Law Against Racial Discrimination (2011).
- The inclusion of Afro-descendants in the census (2011).
- The Education Law recognizing Afro-Descendants (2009).
- The creation of the Presidential Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in the Educational System (2005).
- The celebration of May as the Month of Afro-Descendants and May 10 as Afro-Venezuelan Day (2005).
- The creation of the Ministry of Culture's Liaison Office for Afro-Descendent Communities (2005).
- The designation of a Vice Minister for African Affairs and opening of new embassies in Africa (2005).
- The creation of social missions to reduce poverty among historically marginalized groups (since 2003).
- A voter registration rate of 97% due to civic campaigns by the National Electoral Council targeting disenfranchised poor and rural populations (since 2001).
- The new Constitution which states that Venezuela is a "multicultural and multiethnic society" guided by the principle of equality among cultures (1999).

### Overcoming the Brutal Legacy of Slavery

The new laws and policies established by the Venezuelan government to benefit Afro-Descendants are part of a concerted effort to respond to the injustices of the past. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, an estimated 100,000 enslaved Africans were brought to Venezuela, and their labor fueled an agricultural economy centered on coffee and cacao.

Slavery had a huge impact on Venezuela's history and demography, and even after it was abolished in 1854, freedom did not bring equality. Racism persisted throughout the 20th century to today, and African heritage was denied through an emphasis on racial mixing.

In Venezuelan society, the idea of the mestizo born of European, Indigenous, and African blood, became a cornerstone of national identity, and was used to deny the persistent problem of rampant discrimination the basis of skin color.<sup>1</sup> This is because not all races were seen as equal; blackness was devalued to such an extent that state policies even sought to "whiten"



the population through European immigration. For example, the Immigration Law of 1912 barred non-European and Jewish immigrants from entering the country for decades. Under the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, which lasted from 1952 to 1958, the official Plan of the Nation included "whitening" the population through what he called "selective immigration."<sup>2</sup>

The situation is very different today, under the government of President Hugo Chávez, which has sought to expose and eradicate racism in Venezuela. Although perhaps 20 to 30 percent of the Venezuelan population is Afro-Descendent, Chávez is the first president in the country's history to claim and honor his African and Indigenous ancestry. In an interview in 2005, he said: "Hate against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth, because of my curly hair. And I'm so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it's African."<sup>3</sup>

### Policies to Benefit Afro-Venezuelans

Since President Chávez was first elected in 1998, numerous reforms have been instituted to address the problems faced by Afro-Venezuelans and to guarantee their social, political, and economic rights. The process began with the **1999 Constitution**, which states that Venezuela is "a multiethnic and multicultural society" that "guarantees the right to life, work, learning, education, social justice and equality, without discrimination or subordination of any kind."

The constitution also recognizes intercultural education, a type of learning and teaching that takes into account "special social and cultural characteristics, values and traditions."<sup>4</sup> This helped pave the way for the creation in 2005 of the **Presidential Commission for the Prevention and**



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**Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in the Venezuelan Educational System.**<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, a new **Organic Law on Education** was approved in 2009 that addresses the rights of Afro-descendants in five of its articles. It states: “The law requires that educational institutions teach the history of African descendants and prohibits the media from conveying messages of discrimination against Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants.”<sup>6</sup>

Grassroots organizations in Venezuela have been key players in the new initiatives to protect and empower Afro-Descendants. In 2008, a request by the Afro-Venezuelan Network prompted lawmakers to develop anti-discrimination legislation, the result of which was the **Law Against Racial Discrimination** passed in 2011. The objective of the law, which was developed in part through the legislative committee on Indigenous Peoples, is to “establish mechanisms to prevent, respond to, punish and eradicate racial discrimination.”

The law does many important things: it prohibits organizations and activities that promote racial discrimination; calls on the state to guarantee the right to political, economic, social, and cultural participation for all; requires that statistics be gathered on race and ethnicity to promote the inclusion of vulnerable groups; affirms that education should promote tolerance and respect for cultural diversity and that the media should include programming to help prevent and eliminate racial discrimination.

The law also establishes a National Institute Against Racial Discrimination under the Ministry of the Interior and Justice that is tasked with carrying out public policies to prevent and end discrimination. It outlines penalties such as fines, community service and jail time for crimes involving racial discrimination. It addresses issues such as equal access to the justice system, education, employment, housing, health care, communications, and goods and services. In short, this groundbreaking legislation sets the stage for true social justice in Venezuela. Its effects are already being seen. For example, in 2011, for the first time, the national census included an option allowing respondents to self-identify as Afro-Descendent.

### New Ways to Honor Venezuela's African Roots

Since 2005, the month of May has been celebrated in Venezuela as **Afro-Descendent Month**. Meanwhile, each May 10th is known as **Afro-Venezuelan Day**, a date chosen to honor the Black revolutionary figure José Leonardo Chirinos,

who led an armed revolt against Spanish colonial authorities in 1795. These occasions are part of a changing imagery around race in Venezuela; the country's new currency features an image of another Black independence leader known as “Negro Primero,” and, unlike before, many Afro-Venezuelans hold prominent positions in the current government.

In the area of foreign policy, Venezuela's relations with Africa and the Caribbean have increased enormously in the last decade. A **Vice Minister for African Affairs** was named in 2005, and embassies have been opened up in 18 different African nations including Angola, Congo, Mali, and Morocco.<sup>7</sup> Assistance to Africa has expanded, as well; in May of 2012, it was announced that Venezuela would donate \$20 million to help eliminate malaria in West Africa as part of a 2009 agreement with the Economic Community of West African States.<sup>8</sup>

In the Caribbean, Venezuela is helping ease the energy through PetroCaribe, an agreement to supply countries with oil at market prices made affordable through beneficial financing terms. This aid provides member countries with energy security and stimulates economic and social development. Currently, 18 countries belong to **PetroCaribe**. Haiti has been the recipient of increased assistance after the devastating earthquake that struck the country in January 2010. That year alone, Venezuela sent 8,139 tons of food, medicines and other forms of humanitarian assistance.<sup>9</sup>

With these initiatives, the Venezuelan government is advancing a broad policy of solidarity both at home and abroad, and helping to elevate the status and humanity of Afro-Descendants.

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