

Caribbean nations demand slavery compensation

Former colonies are making demands for Europe to make payments to atone for slavery and its legacy. But is it right, or even possible, to punish present-day nations for crimes of the past?



One way ticket: Europeans were responsible for transporting millions of African slaves.



They were forceably abducted from their homes, marched in chains, crammed into unbearably overcrowded ships, and sent overseas into new lives of back-breaking servitude. And in the Caribbean, where many of these African slaves were sent to work, the legacy of this brutal trade still reverberates over 150 years later.

The 14 leaders of Caricom, the region's collective body, met on Monday to discuss legal action against Britain, France and the Netherlands over their role in the slave trade. They are demanding a formal apology and payments of billions, although an exact figure has not been released.

Caribbean countries say they still suffer from the effects of slavery, which created deep social inequalities and hampered economic development. Persistent poverty and poor literacy levels in the region are attributed to colonial neglect.

Some historians object and argue that this claim oversimplifies the issue

— while European plantation owners did benefit from slavery, almost 90% of those shipped to the colonies were enslaved by other Africans.

And when Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807, the Royal Navy enforced the ban by shutting down the slave trade routes and seizing slave ships at sea, regardless of where the slaves were bound. So while Britain's involvement in the slave trade is shameful, latterly the country became a champion for change.

Others say justice demands more action now: Britain did pay compensation worth an incredible 40% of the Treasury's budget after abolition — but not to the slaves. Instead it went to slave owners to reimburse them for the loss of their 'property'.

Supporters of the Caribbean bid for compensation also point out that the UK recently paid £20m to apologise for the brutal suppression of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s, but in that

case, the money went to living survivors and their families. It is much harder to know who deserves to be paid for slavery over a hundred years ago.

SLAVES TO HISTORY?

Some argue that while slavery remains a deplorable stain on Europe's history, we cannot punish present generations for past actions which were taken according to an entirely different moral code. If countries start paying reparations for historic crimes, where do we stop? Could Britain sue Denmark for Viking attacks? Slaves were treated appallingly, but Britain's working classes also lived in terrible conditions during the industrial revolution; should they be compensated as well?

Others reply that much of Europe's prosperity was built by exploiting slaves — it is only right to repay their ancestors today. There is no expiry date on such a crime. Europe should both apologise and redistribute some of its wealth.

Q & A

Q Is slavery still a problem?

A The descendants of people who were forced into slavery can feel that it still has a negative impact on their lives. In America, where slave ownership and abolition prompted the civil war, relations between the races is still one of the defining issues in politics

today. And slavery still continues — the UN estimates that up to 30 million people around the world are currently enslaved.

Q What else are campaigners demanding reparations for?

A Many developing countries, led by India, are demanding that the developed world pays into a £120 billion climate change fund, on the grounds that industrialised nations emitted CO₂ emissions as they pur-

sued prosperity: if they want poorer countries to skip this environmentally damaging method of progress, they should foot the bill.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.'

Søren Kierkegaard

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Caribbean nations demand slavery compensation

WORD WATCH

Development – *The Economist* points out that former slave countries in the Caribbean are doing well by global comparisons. In financial terms, the Bahamas is quite close to Italy and Spain, and Barbados is more developed than most South American countries. Haiti is the only country in the region that ranks among the world's poorest.

Literacy – St Vincent's prime minister said that when the British gave its colonies independence in the 1960s, the former imperial power left 70% of the black population illiterate.

Slave trade – While the practice of owning slaves was not banned in most British territories until 1833, the trading of slaves was prohibited in 1807. The same year, the navy established the

West Africa Squadron which managed to suppress, if not wipe out, the slave trade.

Mau Mau – In the 1950s, just before the end of British rule, rebels from the Kenyan Kikuyu tribe rose up against the colonial government which had taken away their land. The Mau Mau were widely accused of atrocities of their own, but these were eclipsed by the brutality of the British government's response.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should Europe pay reparations to former slave colonies?
2. How long should a country be held accountable for its past crimes?

ACTIVITIES

1. In pairs, list ways other than reparations in which European countries might help former colonies affected by the slave trade.
2. Creative writing: from the perspective of a slave, slave owner or slave trader, imagine you hear news that slavery is to be abolished. Describe your reactions.

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 **NOTES**

