

Leaders say ‘time has come’ for slavery reparations discussion

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REUTERS

APIA, Samoa – Commonwealth leaders, ending a weeklong summit in Samoa, said on Saturday the time had come for a discussion on whether Britain should commit to reparations for its role in the transatlantic slave trade.

Slavery and the threat of climate change were major themes for representatives of the 56 countries in the group, most with roots in Britain’s empire, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting that began in the Pacific Islands nation on Monday.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, whose country has long rejected calls for financial compensation for nations affected by slavery, said summit discussions were not “about money.”

On slavery, the leaders said in a joint statement they had “agreed that the time has come for a meaningful, truthful and respectful conversation toward forging a common future based on equity.”

The push for ex-colonial powers such as Britain to pay reparations or make other amends for slavery and its legacies has gained momentum worldwide, particularly among the Caribbean Community and the African Union.

The statement also made reference to “blackbirding,” a term for people from places including the Pacific Islands being deceived, coerced or kidnapped to work on plantations in Australia and elsewhere.

Those opposed to reparations say countries should not be held responsible for historical wrongs, while those in support say the legacy of slavery has led to vast and persistent racial inequality.

The joint statement did not mention what form reparations should take.

Starmer told a news conference the joint statement did two things: “It notes calls for discussion and it agrees that this is the time for a conversation.

“But I should be really clear here, in the two days we’ve been here, none of the discussions have been about money. Our position is very, very clear in re-



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the summit discussions were not “about money.” STEFAN ROUSSEAU/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

lation to that,” he said.

Professor Kingsley Abbott, director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, said the statement was a sign of a potentially historic breakthrough on the issue.

“The commitment to conversations on reparatory justice wedges open the door for dialogue, and now the hard work really begins,” said Abbott, who attended the summit.

The joint statement also referred to concern about “the severe consequences of the climate crisis, including rising temperatures and sea levels.”

In a boost for Pacific Islands such as Tuvalu under threat from rising seas, they issued the Commonwealth’s first Oceans Declaration, affirming that a nation’s maritime boundaries should remain fixed even if climate change causes small island states to be submerged.

Fixing maritime boundaries means atoll nations can continue to reap the economic benefit of vast fishing grounds, even if populations must migrate as dry land area is significantly reduced. The declaration bolsters momentum for international law to recognize the perpetual statehood of sinking island states.

More than half of the Commonwealth’s members are small nations, many of them low-lying islands at risk from rising sea levels caused by climate change.

New chief

The Commonwealth members selected Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey as the group’s new secretary-general. Botchwey, a supporter of reparations for transatlantic slavery and colonialism, takes over from Britain’s Patricia Scotland, who has been in the job since 2016.

King Charles and Queen Camilla, who both attended the summit, flew out of Samoa after a visit in which the monarch acknowledged the Commonwealth’s “painful” history.

Before leaving, the royal pair attended a farewell ceremony in heavy rain in the village of Siumu.

Charles said in a speech to the summit on Friday that he understood “from listening to people across the Commonwealth how the most painful aspects of our past continue to resonate.”

“It is vital, therefore, that we understand our history, to guide us toward making the right choices in future,” he said.