

STATEMENT BY FRED MITCHELL MP
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THE BAHAMAS
GLOBAL DIASPORA CONFERENCE

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I wish to thank the African Union for sponsoring and convening this important conference.

I wish to thank the President and people of South Africa for the kind invitation to attend this important conference and for the excellent arrangements which they have made for this conference.

I return to this country with a great deal of personal fondness, having first come here as a Commonwealth Observer in 1992 and again in 1994 and as Minister several times in the period that I served in this office from 2002 to 2007.

In the year 2003 on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the independence of Haiti, the distinguished predecessor in office Thabo Mbeki paid a state visit to The Bahamas along with his then Foreign Minister Nkosasana Dlamini Zuma. Our Prime Minister has asked me to say that our country would be pleased to host a visit by you Mr. President to our country at a time which is convenient to your Excellency.

In 2007, the former Minister of Education and now Minister of Science and Technology Nolani Pandor paid an official visit to The Bahamas and was the principal speaker at an official ceremony to mark the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

I have taken some time to outline the specific links between The Bahamas and South Africa.

As I speak there are several Bahamian doctors in this country learning their specialties. I thank the government and people of South Africa for this.

There are other ties to Africa mainly to West and Central Africa of kinship and ethnicity. We who have visited the continent even to this very day marvel as we walk around and see the people who look just like our friends and family at home.

The point is we feel at home here.

I wish to convey the regret of the Prime Minister the Rt. Honourable Perry Christie for his not being able to attend this important conference. There was a general election in The Bahamas on 7th May and he was returned to office. The State opening of Parliament took place only day before yesterday and so it was not possible for him in the circumstances to travel here. He sends his thanks to you for the invitation and his best wishes for the success of the conference.

The government and people of The Bahamas supports the effort to convene this Diaspora Conference. Indeed, The Bahamas has participated in all aspects of this effort since it began some seven years ago. We attended meetings in Kingston and in Barbados which planned the participation of the Caricom region and we are pleased to see it come to this important convocation.

I have had the advantage of reviewing the draft of the declaration and say that we broadly accept its conclusions.

In particular we embrace the need for the south south dialogue. We especially embrace the call to action in the investment in education and culture. In education, the Bahamas government has pledged over the next five years to double its investment in education. Education is the key to success in so many areas. It is important in eliminating poverty.

Last night, it was a proud moment as a Caricom citizen to hear the music of Bob Marley from Jamaica sing its sweet songs, the melody clear and true.

There is an artist from The Bahamas, whose name is Tony McKay, the Obeah Man, and I am sure were he alive today, he would singing equally and clearly his

anthem well known at home: pay me what you owe me! I come to collect everything that you owe me.

I wish therefore to say that The Bahamas will assist in every way that it can to forge a consensus on these plans of action, to help to execute the plans and to ensure that the message is disseminated through public education at home.

We have made valuable contacts here in South Africa. Our distinguished former Minister of Education Alfred Sears and Foreign Service Officer Frank Davis join me on this visit.

This is of particular importance to me because I represent Fox Hill in Nassau, which is one of the remaining villages of people of African descent made up of those who were never enslaved; the village was established as a result of the abolition of the slave trade and people freed on the high seas were set down in Fox Hill where they live today. I am therefore proud to represent them here today. They are proud of their African heritage and mark the occasion every year on the first Monday in August and again on the second Tuesday in August as Fox Hill Day.

We look forward to joining with our fiends in North America in developing the ideas which are advanced here at this conference. Our ties of kith and kin are strong with North America as well.

Once again, I thank you for this and support the declaration. I look forward to seeing you all in The Bahamas very soon.

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