

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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JUSTICE FOR THE JENA 6

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On Friday, September 14, 2007, the state appeals court in Lake Charles, Louisiana threw out the aggravated battery conviction of Mychal Bell, one of the Jena Six students, stating that he should not have been tried and convicted as an adult for his alleged role in last year's fight with a white high school classmate in Jena, La.

Today, on the steps of City Hall, New York City Council Member Albert Vann, Dr. Zulema Blair, Chair of the Black Brooklyn Empowerment Coalition, Hazel Dukes, President of the NAACP New York State Conference, and Karen Boykin Towns, President of the NAACP Brooklyn Branch, carried the torch for the New York City area to bring awareness and demonstrate for full justice for the Jena 6 high school students who were victims of racial discrimination and differential treatment by the District Attorney in Jena, Louisiana.

Joining Council Member Albert Vann, the Black Brooklyn Empowerment Coalition and the NAACP representative on the City Hall Steps were: New York Congresswoman Yvette D. Clarke; Assembly Member Darryl C. Towns, Chair of the New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus; Assembly Member Annette Robinson, Council of Black Elected Democrats (COBED); Council Member Robert Jackson, Co-Chair of the New York City Council Black, Latino and Asian Caucus; Assembly Member Karim Camara; Senator Eric Adams; Council Member Charles Barron; Council Member Leroy Comrie; Council Member Inez Dickens; New York Civil Liberties Union; Center for Law and Social Justice; NAACP Metropolitan Council of Branches; 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care; Teamsters Local 237; Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions; December 12th Movement; Malcolm X Grassroots Movement; African-American Clergy and Elected Officials; National Action Network; Black Vets for Social Justice; and National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI).

In addition to awareness, money is also needed for the Jena 6 legal defense fund. We also urge you to sign the online petition calling for Louisiana Governor, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, to intervene and throw out the cases of the Jena 6. Telephone calls to Louisiana Governor Blanco can also be made to express this sentiment. **The petition can be reached from the NAACP Web Site “www.naacp.org” and the Governor’s office can be reached by telephone at (225) 342-0991. Donations to the legal defense fund can be made online at “https://secure.colorofchange.org/jena_fund/” or checks can be made payable to Jena 6 Defense and mailed to Jena 6 Defense Committee, P.O. Box 2798, Jena, LA 71342.**

Dr. Zulema Blair, Chair of the Black Brooklyn Empowerment Coalition, declared:

“Our young Black males have been used too often as sacrificial lambs. When racism becomes transparent in public institutions, such as the criminal justice system and educational institutions, it is evident that not nearly enough has been done to protect our population from a Jim Crow ideology that we thought younger generations would not have to endure. We cannot continue to allow these behaviors to be played out in these “hidden” arenas, for they will once again become the norm everywhere. We, therefore, are seeking justice for these six young Black males in Jena, Louisiana, and we expect that at the end of this process, there will be victory for all of them.

Hazel N. Dukes, President of the NAACP New York State Conference, stated:

“We are here today because we are reminded of our Christian creed, that we are our brothers and sisters keepers. The injustice that is being carried out towards the Jena 6 calls for Americans to stand and denounce these actions. The words of the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall ring as clearly today as they did when pronounced several decades ago: Justice delayed, is justice denied.”

Assemblyman Darryl C. Towns, Chair of the New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus, remarked:

“The Louisiana Governor, Kathleen Blanco, needs to intervene before this escalates into a full-blown racial incident that could potentially cause irreparable damage to the fifty years of progress in the South, as it relates to the civil rights movement, not to mention ruining the lives of six young men.”

Councilman Robert Jackson, Chair of the New York City Council Black, Latino and Asian Caucus stated:

“The overzealous prosecution of these six teenagers is frightening and truly reminiscent of a time period that countless civil rights activists worked to put an end to. Civil rights injustices must be reacted to today with the same sense of passion and fervor. We must fight to correct this unfair and scarring interruption to their lives.”

Donna Lieberman, Executive Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, stated:

“The racism and injustice endured by the Jena 6 has all the hallmarks of the Jim Crow era: school officials complicit in racism; prosecutors treading lightly when it comes to whites while throwing the book at the black youth; and an all white jury convicting a black teen now facing decades in jail.

As we stand in solidarity to demand justice for the Jena 6, we in New York are reminded of the double-standards in our own city. The over-policing of our schools – where being late to class can land you in jail – and the stop-and-frisk policies that target young people of color demonstrates all too clearly that racism is by no means just confined to the South.”

Marq Claxton of 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement expressed:

“The Jena 6 case is a stark reminder that this country has not progressed as far as many people believe. This improper criminal prosecution of the Jena 6 is just the latest manifestation of a governmental structure that is steeped in racism and the selective enforcement of the law.”

Catherine Albisa, Executive Director of the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, stated:

“Last week over 20 human rights organizations signed a letter calling on the Governor of Louisiana to condemn the hanging of the nooses at Jena High School and to ensure review of the appropriateness of the criminal proceedings against the Jena 6.

We applaud the actions of the appeals court, which vacated the conviction of Mychal Bell, as a first step in restoring the human right to education and dignity for the Jena 6. To guarantee the right to education for all students in Jena High School, however, authorities must take immediate steps to address the racially charged and hostile environment students still face.”

BACKGROUND: In the fall of 2006, in Jena, Louisiana, a small town that is 85% white, a series of events unfolded that seem more reflective of the Jim Crow era. At Jena High School, students of different races rarely sat together, with Black students sitting on bleachers and white students sitting under a large shade tree, referred to as the “white tree.” The day after a Black student, during a school assembly, asked the principal for permission to sit under the “white tree”, nooses were hung from the tree. When the principal found out that three white students were responsible, he recommended their expulsion. However, the Board of Education and Superintendent overruled the recommendation and reduced the punishment to a three-day expulsion. The Superintendent justified this by claiming the noose hanging was simply an adolescent prank, although it falls into the classification of a federal hate crime. Tension flared between African-American and white students leaving a black student Mychal Bell on trial facing 22 years in prison.

For information please call Mandela Jones at (212) 788-7356.

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