

Submission to the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Cuba's National Program "Color Cubano" and its Comprehensive Approach to Combating Racism and the Legacy of Slavery

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Submitted by: Carlota's Warriors for Cuba

On behalf of Carlota's Warriors for Cuba, to the United Nations Human Rights Commission Universal Periodic Review (UNHRC-UPR). Thank you for this opportunity as a civil society organization to offer this document to the Committee for the Eliminations of Racial Discrimination, that represents our collective witness in support of the Sovereign Nation of Cuba for inclusion in the UPR submission - April 2026. We submit this document to highlight the comprehensive and multifaceted approach being undertaken by the republic of Cuba to address the historical legacies of slavery and to combat racism. Our organization has been particularly attentive and in support of Cuba's position as a nation that has both championed international anti-colonial solidarity and efforts to combat national racial inequalities.

In December 2024, members from our organization had the distinct privilege of participating in the International Conference for the Decade of People of African Descent¹ in Havana, Cuba organized by the national Color Cubano program against racism and racial discrimination and Office of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Republic of Cuba. This conference, which brought together global leaders, activists, and scholars, served as a pivotal moment to assess progress made since the International Decade for the People of African Descent inception proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 2015². It was also an invaluable opportunity to witness, firsthand, the concrete steps the Cuban government and its civil society are taking to dismantle racial discrimination. Our observations on the ground, from visits to historic sites and community projects to dialogues with educators and government officials, form the basis of this document.

To understand Cuba's present commitment to racial justice, one must first understand its past. The legacy of slavery in Cuba is not a distant, abstract concept but a living memory etched into the national consciousness. This is perhaps best exemplified by the story of Carlota, an enslaved woman of Yoruba descent who, in

November 1843, led a historic rebellion at the Triunvirato sugar plantation in Matanzas province³. Carlota, alongside other leaders like Fermina, symbolized the fierce resistance of enslaved Africans against the brutal colonial slave system. Today, a powerful statue of Carlota stands at the Triunvirato site, a memorial our delegation has the opportunity to visit, serving as a permanent reminder that the fight against racial oppression is central to the Cuban identity.

On our trip, we witnessed firsthand how this historical memory on the legacy of slavery and resistance is not confined to museums. It is actively taught in Cuban schools and forms a core part of the national curriculum. As U.S. educators from our organization noted during our visit, the Cuban educational system presents a stark contrast to the often-distorted or minimized teaching of Black history in the United States. In Cuba, students learn not only about their own national heroes like Carlota and Antonio Maceo, but also about global Black revolutionary figures such as Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela, framing the Afro-Cuban experience within a broader, international context of resistance against colonialism and imperialism.

This principle of solidarity was powerfully manifested in the 20th century through Operation Carlota. In 1975, in response to requests from the newly independent People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), Cuba launched a military mission to support Angola resist an invasion by the apartheid regime of South Africa . The mission was deliberately named after Carlota, remembering the historical resistance of African people in Cuba to racism and colonialism. This history is crucial; it demonstrates that Cuba's anti-racist stance has never been passive and is not new. It has been an ongoing, historical, active, internationalist principle, forged in solidarity with African liberation movements and rooted in the nation's own principle of solidarity.

Building on this revolutionary and internationalist foundation, the Cuban government has taken concrete, institutional steps to confront persistent racial disparities through the "Programa Nacional contra el Racismo y la Discriminación Racial" (National Program against Racism and Racial Discrimination), known as "Color Cubano"⁴ . Launched in 2019, this program represents a comprehensive state policy that goes beyond mere rhetoric. It is a national program implemented across multiple sectors of society including: 1. Education system(schools, universities, curriculum, teacher training), 2. Labor & economic sector (employment, income, job access, economic opportunities), 3. Legal & justice system (laws, courts,

anti-discrimination enforcement, reporting mechanisms), 4. Media & cultural production (TV, journalism, arts, representation, public narratives), 5. Community & territorial spaces (neighborhoods, municipalities, grassroots organizing), 6. Research, data & knowledge production (universities, data collection, policy research), and 7. Government & state institutions (ministries, national coordination, policy implementation). The national program is designed to address the structural and cultural vestiges of racism in Cuban society.

During our visit, we witnessed how "Color Cubano" is being implemented across these sectors of society. The program operates through a network of governmental institutions, territorial governments, academic bodies, and civil society. This institutionalization of anti-racism is a significant step made possible through the victories of social transformation made through the Cuban Revolution.

A vibrant example of this national program in action at the community level is the civil society organization Karibuni. Based in Old Havana, Karibuni is a local development project that actively carries out the mission of "Color Cubano". Our delegation met with members of Karibuni and witnessed their multifaceted work. Karibuni focuses on improving the quality of life for residents, with a special emphasis on Afro-descendant women and the elderly. They achieve this through a variety of innovative initiatives, including:

- Reviving African Cultural Memory: Through workshops, podcasts, and digital archives, they document and celebrate the stories of Cubans who participated in internationalist missions in Africa, linking personal histories to the broader narrative of Afro-Cuban identity .
- Economic and Social Empowerment: They create and host events like natural hair styling competitions to promote African pride. They also run "Aliento de vida" (Breath of Life) workshops, providing meditation and reading classes for the elderly, and offer support to vulnerable adolescents in the community .

Another vital cultural space we visited was Callejón de Hamel in Havana. This open-air community project, founded by sculptor Salvador González, is a living museum and cultural center dedicated to preserving and promoting Afro-Cuban traditions . Every Sunday, the alley comes alive with rumba music and dance, serving as a space where children and adults from the neighborhood learn about and celebrate their Yoruba (orisha) heritage. It is a powerful example of how

community arts can be a vehicle for preserving African traditions, building self-esteem, and passing on cultural knowledge to younger generations.

Furthermore, the legacy of slavery is remembered with historical accuracy and a deep honoring of resistance through state-supported cultural institutions and memorial sites. Our delegation visited the San Severino Castle, home to the Slave Route Museum in Matanzas, a UNESCO-recognized site⁵. Housed in a former military fortress and barracoon, the museum provides an unflinching look at the horrors of the Middle Passage and the conditions of enslavement, while also dedicating significant space to the cultural and religious legacies of Africa, such as the orisha pantheon. These sites ensure that the painful history of slavery is not forgotten but is instead used as a foundation for education and reconciliation.

Lastly, it is impossible to fully assess the impact of "Color Cubano" without acknowledging the immense obstacle posed by the economic, commercial, and financial inhumane and illegal blockade imposed by the United States for over six decades. Our analysis leads us to conclude that this blockade is not a neutral geopolitical tool; it functions as a racial blockade, disproportionately causing affecting Afro-descendant, indigenous, and marginalized populations.

The blockade deliberately restricts Cuba's access to international markets, financial systems, and essential goods. This results in chronic shortages of medical supplies, fuel, food, and construction materials—resources that are fundamental to human welfare and development. Despite the brutal conditions caused by the United States policy, the Cuban government has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to combating racism. The very existence of a robust, funded, and institutionalized program like "Color Cubano" is a testament to this commitment. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 laid the groundwork for this by transforming the lives of millions of Afro-Cubans through monumental social achievements. The 1961 National Literacy Campaign, for instance, eradicated illiteracy in a single year, disproportionately benefiting rural and Afro-Cuban communities who had been systematically denied education prior to the revolution. The Revolution's provision of universal, free healthcare and education transformed the lives of thousands of Afro-Cubans across the nation.

Our organization's firsthand observations in Cuba, combined with a thorough review of its policies and history, lead us to the conclusion that Cuba is a global leader in the effort to combat racism and address the legacy of slavery. Through the

comprehensive and intersectional "Color Cubano" program, the Cuban government is taking concrete, measurable steps to promote recognition, justice, and development for people of African descent. This state-led initiative is powerfully complemented by a vibrant civil society, exemplified by projects like Karibuni and Callejón de Hamel, which are preserving African traditions and empowering communities at the grassroots level. This work is made even more remarkable by the fact that it is carried out under the crushing weight of a 60+ year U.S. blockade, an unjust and immoral policy that constitutes a form of collective punishment and acts as a racial blockade against the very communities these programs are trying to help. The resilience of the Cuban people and their government's steadfast dedication to racial justice, in spite of these immense hardships, should be an inspiration to the world.

We urge this committee and the international community to recognize and support Cuba's efforts. We call for an end to the US blockade on Cuba, which is the greatest impediment to the full realization of the rights and well-being of all Cubans, and especially its Afro-descendant population. The legacy of Carlota lives on not just in statues and history books, but in the daily struggle of a nation determined to build a future of true equality for all its sons and daughters.

Notes

- [1] Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba. 2024. *Cuba to Hold International Conference "For the Decade of People of African Descent" December 9-13, 2024*. From <https://misiones.cubaminrex.cu/en/articulo/cuba-hold-international-conference-decade-people-african-descent-december-9-13-2024>
- [2] United Nations General Assembly. 2014. *Programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent*. Resolution A/RES/68/237. From <http://undocs.org/en/A/RES/68/237>
- [3] Godfried, Eugène. 2006. *Carlota Lucumi: leader of the 1843 slave rebellion, Triumvirato, Matanzas*. AfroCubaWeb. From <https://www.afrocubaweb.com/carlota.htm>
- [4] Consejo de Estado, República de Cuba. 2019. *Programa Nacional contra el Racismo y la Discriminación Racial*. Instituto Cubano de Investigación Cultural Juan Marinello. From <https://www.ics.gob.cu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/programa-nacional-contra-el-racismo-y-la-discriminacion-racial-pdf-final.pdf>
- [5] Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH). n.d. *Castillo de San Severino: Museo de la Ruta del Esclavo*. Memorias Situadas. From <https://www.cipdh.gob.ar/memorias-situadas/en/lugar-de-memoria/castillo-de-san-severino-museo-de-la-ruta-del-esclavo/>