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Media Release

Pan-African Unity Dialogue in Solidarity with the People of Barbuda *Efforts Underway to Prevent a “Land Grab” by Actor Robert DeNiro*

The Pan-African Unity Dialogue (PAUD), a regular forum of African diaspora organizations in the New York metro area, is expressing support and solidarity with the people of Barbuda as they struggle against a land grab being orchestrated by movie actor and real estate developer Robert DeNiro in collusion with the current government of Prime Minister Gaston Browne.

In addition, PAUD is calling for a **#Shame on You DeNiro** Twitter campaign to draw public attention to this egregious situation and to pressure both DeNiro and the Browne government to cease with this greedy land acquisition and to fully respect the democratic rights that the residents of Barbuda had enjoyed before Hurricane Irma devastated the island in September last year.

“DeNiro represents a face that stands for an array of wealthy investors who fail to be sensitive to the history and traditions of participatory democracy practiced by Barbudans before staking a claim to their paradise,” said Dr. Ron Daniels, Convener of PAUD and President of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century.

Recently, a backroom deal was hatched between the Gaston Browne government and DeNiro and his investor partners that would exploit the horrific damage Barbuda faced in the wake of Hurricane’s Irma’s devastation of the island which resulted in 90% damage to buildings and infrastructure and to the evacuation of all 1800 residents of Barbuda to Antigua. To date, about 400 residents have returned to the 62 square mile island that the Washington Post described as a “forgotten Eden.”

On December 12, just a few weeks after the hurricane struck Barbuda, a sweeping 13-page “amendment” to the hard-won Barbuda Land Act was officially introduced in

Antigua and Barbuda's House of Representatives. It includes changes that entirely reverse the meaning of the law.

In the amendment, a clause declaring Barbuda "owned in common by the people of Barbuda" was deleted and replaced. "The fundamental purpose of the Act is to grant to Barbudans the right to purchase the [land]," the amended act reads.

To add salt to the wound, the amendment also altered the definition of a Barbudan, eliminating those whose grandparents lived on the island. With the law's passage, a swath of the Barbudan diaspora's claims to the land were erased.

Days after the Barbuda Land Act amendment passed in the Antigua & Barbuda Parliament, the Clinton Foundation and the Rocky Mountain Institute announced, unbeknown to the Barbuda Council members, "a new effort to redesign Barbuda's power sector and to shift to a renewable energy model."

Members of 'Barbuda Silent No More' filed a request for an injunction, calling the amendment illegal. But a judge denied the injunction, and last month, the amendment to the land law was approved and signed by the governor general.

The deal would change the island's communal land ownership law in the interest of developers and particularly DeNiro who has plans to build a luxury resort on Barbuda called 'Paradise Found Nobu'. The resort is to be built on 555 acres of land leased to DeNiro for 178 Years, for just \$6.2 million, plus an array of tax benefits.

PM Browne has declared DeNiro an official "economic envoy" of the Government of Antigua and Barbuda. However, a large number of Barbudans including a majority living in diaspora communities in New York, Atlanta and Toronto regard DeNiro, not as an envoy but more as a predator who's playing a role of disaster capitalist in the Caribbean.

"Invariably, such investors get their hands on virgin land, cheap or at no price. They then turn around and sell these lands as luxury properties for the rich and famous and make a quick profit with huge returns....getting a big name attached to your venture is seen as a way of selling to the clientele," said a member of the 'Barbuda Silent No More' group.

There are painful historical echoes in this series of events. Barbuda's history is sparsely documented, but according to residents, the special land law has its roots in 1834, when a pitched conflict erupted in response to an attempt to forcibly relocate newly emancipated slaves in Barbuda to plantations in Antigua so that a slave owner, Sir Christopher Bethell-Codrington, could collect compensation for his lost "property" from the British Crown.

The Barbudan slaves refused to move, preferring to stay on the land and waters where they had long raised animals, farmed, and fished. After a failed attempt to quash the resistance by British forces, the freed slaves eventually gained control over the land on their island.

Indeed, on the land where they had been slaves, Barbudans created a democratic, communal ownership structure, which they have fiercely protected for almost two centuries. Land in Barbuda could not be bought and sold willy nilly to rich and powerful developers. The island ran like a co-op with decisions about land use driven by an elected council and approvals for major developments going to a general vote.

Tiny as it was in numbers, pre-Hurricane Barbudan society offered the Caribbean and the black world, more broadly, a rare example of participatory economic planning and communal land distribution to freed slaves and their descendants from emancipation in 1834 down through the generations to the present. The steep social and economic inequalities that are a fact of life across the Caribbean did not exist in Barbuda. The ocean provides food security, and any Barbudan could claim occupancy of beachfront property.

“The Pan African Unity Dialogue is demanding that Barbudans be given the right by the central government in Antigua to return to their island without hindrance and to re-settle their ancestral lands and resume building Barbuda as a fine example of sustainable, people-centered, democratic development in the Caribbean, ” said Dr. Daniels.

Some Barbudans are calling on DeNiro to express support for the will and desire of Barbudans to maintain their communal land ownership. They concede that his project could still proceed but it would require the consent of the community.

For many Barbudans, recovery from Hurricane Irma has not been “a just recovery.” They cite as a bitter irony that Barbudans with their history of participatory democracy and careful land use practices had all of these rights before the hurricane struck. And now, dispersed from their homes after Irma, they are in the midst of losing them.

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