SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION (CERD)

General Recommendation on Reparations for Enslavement, the Transatlantic Trade in Africans, and Colonialism

Submitted by:
African-Caribbean Reparations and Resettlement Alliance | ACRRA

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INTRODUCTION

The African-Caribbean Reparations and Resettlement Alliance (ACRRA) submits this report in response to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)'s call for inputs on reparations for enslavement, the transatlantic trade in Africans, and colonialism. This submission represents the voices of the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). Founded and led by descendants of the enslaved, ACRRA is dedicated to pursuing reparatory justice on behalf of the Virgin Islands community.

The case for reparations for the USVI is grounded in historical evidence, economic data, and international legal principles. Over 246 years of colonial rule (1671–1917), Denmark directly participated in the transatlantic slave trade, enslaving tens of thousands of

Africans in the Danish West Indies (now the USVI). The island's economy was built entirely on enslaved labor, which produced vast quantities of sugar, cotton, and rum — commodities that enriched Danish planters, merchants, financial institutions, and the Danish Crown.

Denmark abolished slavery in 1848. However, instead of offering restitution to those who had been enslaved, it compensated former slaveowners – rather than the enslaved – thus perpetuating racial injustice. The sale of the Virgin Islands to the United States in 1917 was another egregious violation of the inhabitants' right to self-determination. Virgin Islanders were treated purely as economic assets to be sold. They had no voice in the transaction or in their political future. Today, the descendants of those enslaved continue to experience structural inequalities, political disenfranchisement, and economic hardship – all of which are direct legacies of Danish colonial rule.

New research — including the Brattle Group's 2023 report on reparations for transatlantic chattel slavery and the study "Reconstructing a Slave Society" (Galli et al., 2023) — provides empirical data quantifying Denmark's economic gains from slavery and its long-term impact on the USVI. These findings establish Denmark's financial and moral responsibility to compensate the descendants of enslaved Africans in the territory. Moreover, Denmark has a clear obligation under international human rights law — including ICERD Article 6, the 2001 Durban Declaration, and the 2005 UN Basic Principles on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation — to provide reparatory justice. Addressing these historical wrongs is essential to eliminating the enduring racial discrimination they have engendered.

This submission outlines Denmark's historical responsibility, the resulting economic harm, the international legal framework for reparations, and a plan for implementing comprehensive and transformative reparatory measures.

The legacy of slavery in the Virgin Islands was not limited to labor exploitation. It also included the systematic dehumanization and erasure of African identity. Families were torn apart on auction blocks, children were separated from parents, and enslaved individuals were stripped of their languages, religions, and cultural practices. Denmark's colonial regime imposed rigid racial hierarchies, with laws and customs designed to maintain white dominance and enforce Black subjugation. These practices did not end with emancipation but persisted well into the 20th century, reinforced by economic disenfranchisement and social exclusion.

Moreover, Denmark's colonial governance treated the Virgin Islands not as a society to be nurtured, but as an extraction zone. There was no serious investment in long-term development, infrastructure, or institutions that would have empowered the local population. The public education system, for instance, was deliberately underdeveloped, ensuring a steady supply of cheap labor and denying generations of Virgin Islanders the tools to advance socially or economically.

These colonial patterns laid the foundation for the structural inequalities that continue to affect the territory today. Unemployment, inadequate healthcare services, under-resourced schools, and limited access to capital all reflect a continuum of neglect rooted in Danish colonial design. When Denmark exited the territory in 1917, it left behind no transition plan, no developmental support, and no legacy of inclusion. This failure was not simply a historical oversight but an intentional act of abandonment.

Today, the economic and psychological impact of these policies is still keenly felt. Virgin Islanders remain politically disenfranchised as residents of an unincorporated U.S. territory, unable to vote for president and lacking full congressional representation. The social and economic indicators in the USVI — from child poverty rates to infrastructure conditions — continue to reflect the compounded effects of slavery, colonialism, and systemic disinvestment. Reparations, therefore, are not merely about redressing a historical grievance; they are about acknowledging and ending a continuum of racial injustice that Denmark helped initiate and failed to resolve.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LASTING IMPACTS OF DANISH COLONIAL RULE

For nearly 250 years, the islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John (the Danish West Indies) were integral to Denmark's colonial empire. From the late 17th through the mid-19th century, Denmark enslaved and transported over 100,000 African men, women, and children to these Caribbean islands. These individuals endured extreme physical brutality, deprivation, and dehumanization under one of the region's harshest plantation regimes.

The sugar-based colonial economy was the backbone of Danish rule, generating enormous wealth through the production of sugar and other commodities that were exported annually to Denmark.

Denmark maintained a highly organized system of slavery in the Virgin Islands. It was enforced through government-chartered trading companies (such as the Danish West India Company) that controlled the islands' commerce, through oppressive "slave codes" that ensured enslaved persons remained legally the property of the Crown and plantation owners, and through generous financial incentives for planters (including loans and insurance provided by Danish banks to expand plantation operations). This exploitative system generated immense profits for Denmark but left the enslaved community and their descendants with nothing. Not a single portion of the wealth extracted during this period was ever shared with those who suffered.

In addition to economic exploitation, Danish colonial rule also imposed severe cultural and social changes on the enslaved population. Traditional African customs, languages, and social structures were systematically suppressed, replaced by European norms and practices. This cultural erasure has had lasting impacts, contributing to the identity struggles and social fragmentation that continue to affect the Virgin Islands' population today.

The effects of this injustice are still evident today in the USVI, manifesting as chronic economic underdevelopment, enduring racial disparities in areas like health and education, and continued political marginalization of the territory's people. Decades of being told to "move on" have not healed these wounds; colonialism's damage does not simply fade away over time, but instead has festered across generations.

THE 1848 EMANCIPATION WITHOUT REPARATIONS

On July 3, 1848, a mass rebellion by the enslaved population of the Virgin Islands compelled Danish Governor Peter von Scholten to declare an immediate end to slavery. However, emancipation brought no justice or material assistance for the freed people. It is important to note that this emancipation was not a benevolent gift from Denmark, but was precipitated by the courage and resistance of the enslaved people themselves. Denmark instead paid the equivalent of millions of dollars in "compensation" to former slaveowners for their lost "property," while the newly freed individuals received no land, financial restitution, or support. With no resources to build independent livelihoods, most freed people had to continue laboring on the same plantations under exploitative contracts. This arrangement ensured that the Black population remained economically dependent on the Danish colonial elite even after slavery's formal abolition.

THE 1917 SALE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

In 1917, after nearly two and a half centuries of colonial rule, Denmark sold the Virgin Islands to the United States for $25 million in gold. This deal was struck without any consultation of the islands' inhabitants. This was a blatant disregard of their right to self-determination. In the transaction, Virgin Islanders were treated as commodities. They obtained no compensation or remedy, even though generations of their labor had created the very wealth being exchanged. The transfer of sovereignty simply replaced Danish colonial rule with American colonial administration. As a result, the people of the Virgin Islands were left without full political rights or self-governance under the new colonial power. This final act of exploitation further cements Denmark's duty to provide reparations.

NEW RESEARCH AND ECONOMIC HARM

The immense scale of colonial exploitation in the Virgin Islands can also be expressed in stark economic terms. Modern analyses have attempted to quantify Denmark's financial debt arising from its colonial enterprise. The Brattle Group's 2023 report, for example, provides a detailed framework for calculating the reparations owed by former colonial powers, including Denmark.

Academic studies (e.g., Galli et al., 2023) likewise underscore the severe, long-term systemic economic losses inflicted on the USVI through Danish colonial policies.

Denmark's direct economic gains from slavery were enormous. At the height of the 18th-century plantation economy, up to 75% of Denmark's Gross National Product was derived from exports from the Danish West Indies, such as sugar, rum, and cotton. Danish banks and insurance companies also heavily financed and profited from the slave economy. For instance, a bond issuance in 1757 to fund Danish slaving expeditions was equivalent to billions of dollars in today's terms. Major financial institutions like the Danish National Bank, and insurers such as Alm. Brand and Tryg, amassed great wealth by insuring plantations, slave ships, and even the lives of enslaved people as property.

By applying conservative interest rates to the value of unpaid labor and expropriated wealth (the monetary equivalent of stolen labor, liberty, and resources), researchers have estimated that Denmark's outstanding reparations liability is on the order of $500–$700 billion. In concrete terms, one model calculates approximately $486 billion owed for the slavery era (using a 2.3% annual interest model), while a slightly higher interest assumption (2.5%) yields about $681 billion. In addition, roughly $6 billion is attributable to post-emancipation economic disparities imposed on Virgin Islanders. (For context, the current GDP of the USVI is only on the order of a few billion dollars per year, underscoring how these reparations estimates are several hundred times larger and reflect the massive scale of wealth extracted.)

By any measure, Denmark profited immensely at the expense of the Virgin Islands. This established an undeniable economic responsibility to make reparations.

LEGAL BASIS FOR REPARATIONS

International law provides a clear foundation for Denmark's obligation to deliver reparative justice for its historic role in slavery and colonialism:

ICERD Article 6: Requires that victims of racial discrimination receive "just and adequate reparation or satisfaction" for any damage suffered.

Durban Declaration (2001): Recognizes slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity, and calls on states to assume responsibility for past injustices and their lasting consequences.

UN Basic Principles on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation (2005): Affirms that victims of gross human rights violations are entitled to full and effective reparation, which includes measures of compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition.

These instruments collectively reaffirm that the passage of time does not diminish the duty to remedy such injustices under international law.

Denmark is a State party to ICERD and was an active participant in the 2001 World Conference against Racism that produced the Durban Declaration. Denmark's pervasive involvement in the slave trade and colonial exploitation of the USVI clearly meets the criteria identified in these international instruments. Thus, providing reparations is not a discretionary act — it is a binding requirement under international human rights law.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPARATORY JUSTICE

ACRRA urges the following measures to achieve meaningful reparatory justice for the U.S. Virgin Islands:

Formal Apology: Denmark must officially acknowledge and apologize for its role in enslaving Africans in the Danish West Indies, recognizing that slavery was a crime against humanity. This apology should be issued at the highest levels of the Danish government and directed to the descendants of the enslaved people of the Virgin Islands.

Financial Reparations: Denmark should establish a substantial Reparations Fund for the USVI. The scale of this fund must be commensurate with the documented economic harm — such as the hundreds of billions of dollars quantified by recent studies — and sufficient to compensate for the enduring legacy of slavery and colonial exploitation. The fund should directly benefit the descendants of enslaved people and the broader Virgin Islands community.

Development-Based Initiatives: Invest in modern infrastructure, quality healthcare services, education, and renewable energy in the USVI to reverse colonial-era underdevelopment and address persistent disparities. These long-term development programs would foster self-sufficiency and improve the standard of living for Virgin Islanders, thereby serving as a form of rehabilitation and a guarantee of non-repetition.

Institutional and Corporate Accountability: Require Danish institutions and corporations that profited from slavery — including prominent banks and insurers — to contribute to the reparations program. This step ensures that those who benefited from centuries of exploitation acknowledge their historical wrongdoing and actively participate in redressing the harm.

Cultural and Historical Restitution: Return stolen historical artifacts, archival records, and other cultural heritage items to the people of the Virgin Islands. This will help restore the territory's cultural patrimony and honor the history and identity of its people.

Together, these recommendations encompass the major pillars of reparatory justice. They address acknowledgment and apology, compensation, rehabilitation and development, accountability, and restitution, in line with established international standards.

CONCLUSION

Denmark's legacy of slavery and colonialism continues to shape the economic and social conditions of the U.S. Virgin Islands to this day, leaving the territory's majority-African-descendant population with enduring inequities. The descendants of enslaved Virgin Islanders have waited far too long for justice and repair. Providing reparations is not optional; it is a legal obligation and an urgent moral imperative necessary to finally rectify centuries of injustice and dispossession. Reparations are about more than monetary compensation; they are fundamentally about acknowledgment, healing, and the restoration of dignity to a people who have endured intergenerational trauma.

Indeed, around the world, governments and institutions are increasingly acknowledging and atoning for similar historical wrongs, and Denmark should not be an exception.

ACRRA respectfully calls on CERD to urge Denmark to formally commit to a comprehensive reparations program that acknowledges its past, compensates its victims, and ensures justice for future generations. Only through such concrete action can Denmark begin to atone for its past and ensure a just future for the people of the Virgin Islands.

SUBMITTED BY:

African-Caribbean Reparations and Resettlement Alliance (ACRRA)

ANNEXES:

ACRRA's submissions to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (dated 28 March and 30 March 2025) are attached to this report as supporting legal documentation.

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