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Washington, April 16 (RHC)-- Black American slaves were promised "40 acres and a mule" by the U.S. government in the aftermath of the Civil War that freed them in 1865, a promise that was rescinded soon after it was made.

In the century and a half since, facing racism and repression, Black Americans have called for reparations, a notion that has vexed political leaders and an idea that has been met with significant resistance along the way.

Now, for the first time in its history, the United States government is moving towards addressing the question of reparations for the descendants of African slaves. President Joe Biden, in a meeting at the White House this week with Black U.S. legislators, renewed his support for a commission to study how the descendants of African slaves can be compensated.

“We are grateful for that because we are now doing something historically that’s never been done,” Representative Sheila Jackson Lee said of Biden’s commitment. “What you want the president to do is say that as we move forward,” Jackson Lee told reporters at the White House.

There were four million African slaves in the U.S. when slavery was abolished after the Civil War. So called “Jim Crow” laws in the southern states dispossessed Black farmers from their lands and institutionalised segregation and disenfranchisement. Now there are more than 42 million African-American citizens of the United States.

In 2019, the average wealth of Black families amounted to \$36,000, compared to \$189,000 for whites, according to U.S. Federal Reserve data. Black men are almost twice as likely as whites to be unemployed and are six times more likely to be imprisoned, according to government statistics.

Reparations for former slaves have been talked about in American politics for decades but there has never been consensus on what should be done. A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted in June 2020 found only 20 percent of US adults support paying money to the descendants of slaves.

“The U.S. has never fully or properly reckoned with the gross human rights violation of chattel slavery and the post-emancipation racist policies that continue to harm Black people in the U.S. today,” said Dreisen Heath, a researcher and advocate for reparations at Human Rights Watch, a non-governmental organisation. “If racial justice is ever to be achieved, repair needs to be a part of the equation,” she said.

Democrats in the US House of Representatives are moving to pass a bill to establish a commission to study and develop reparation proposals for African Americans. It passed the House Judiciary Committee by a vote of 25 to 17 late on Wednesday night.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests that rocked the U.S. in 2020 after the death of George Floyd and confronted with the rise of white nationalism, the establishment of a reparations commission would open a venue for badly-needed public dialogue about the systemic and long-term harms of racism in America, experts say.

“The history of trans-Atlantic slavery has left an indelible mark in the continued presence of racism, racial discrimination, and ideologies of racial superiority in U.S. legal, political, social and economic structures and underscores the interconnection between the historical wrongs of slavery and contemporary injustices,” E Tendayi Achiume, a professor of law at the University of California – LA School of Law told a House panel earlier this year.

The scope of future recommendations goes far beyond financial compensation to descendants of slaves for lost wealth, said Achiume, who presented a report to the United Nations General Assembly in 2019 on the urgency of reparations for racial discrimination rooted in the slave trade and colonialism.

“The reparations commission will provide the foundation” for a “comprehensive accounting of the harms of slavery,” she said.

The House bill would establish a commission of 13 members to be appointed by Congress and the president to study the question of reparations and make national recommendations within a year.

The commission would be funded with \$12 million to hire staff, obtain data and conduct hearings. Its mandate would be to document the institution of slavery in the U.S. from the first arrival of Black slaves in 1619 to the end of the US Civil War in 1865. It would then assess the subsequent forms of discrimination that have harmed Black Americans since they were granted full U.S. citizenship in 1868.

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