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SPECIFIC GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS: MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by the International Human Rights Association
of American Minorities, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement,
which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council
resolution 1996/31.

[11 March 1999]

1. This statement is made on behalf of the elders and culture keepers of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Islands of the United States and the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition. The latter organization was founded as a means to connect all the people of the Sea Islands with other people around the world that are interested in assisting the Gullah people with the preservation and continuation of its native culture.

2. The ancestors of the Gullah were the captives of British enslavers who kidnapped them from the African continent during the Transatlantic slavery system period. Through various academic studies and scores of documents including ledgers, journals, newspaper clippings, wills, etc., it appears that the majority of the African people that were brought to the islands off the Atlantic coast of the United States were from West Africa. The Windward and Rice Coast down to Angola were the lands from which skilled Africans were removed and then sold and held in bondage as labourers without choices or rights in the Caribbean and, later, the Sea Islands.

3. The Sea Islands, the home of the Gullah and Geechee people, are located from Georgetown County, South Carolina (at the base of North Carolina), down to Amelia Island in northern Florida. The largest "slave" auction block in the United States was Charles Town in the Carolinas. This city was built by the labour of indigenous or Native American peoples along with enslaved Africans brought from Barbados by a group of Anglo men referred to as "the British Lord's Proprietors".

4. Charles Town is now called "Charleston, South Carolina". Many people consider this the centre of Gullah culture. However, the main places where it is still possible to locate viable Gullah communities are the same places where the culture developed - on the islands. Because they were on isolated islands where the Gullahs had minimal contact with Anglo culture, Africans that came from various ethnic groups and who spoke different tongues and had different spiritual rituals were able to combine these and form a new culture with its own language. This is Gullah.

5. Gullah people were the labour force that harvested "Caroline Gold" rice which became the rice that brought the highest price on the market. They also harvested and processed Sea Island cotton which was used all over the world to make the finest garments. Indigo completed the list of "cash crops". These products were brought forth due to the knowledge of their cultivation that the Gullahs had. They created the wealth that built the infrastructure of the United States and also supported the base of European cities such as London and Liverpool, England.

6. Gullah and Geechee people were never allowed to express their rights as human beings due to the various means of oppression that they endured through different periods in history. They were forced to work without pay and were sold away from their family and friends. The break from their clans and tribes caused the connection with others that lived under the same conditions, but it also caused irreparable damage in that the Gullahs may never be able to return to the villages from which their great-great-great-grandparents were stolen. They were stripped of the chance to pass this information on.

7. During enslavement, Gullahs and Geechees were not allowed to write or read. This was made law in the United States. If they were found doing either of these things, punishments as severe as death could be imposed and were in many cases. They were also banned from playing the drum after it was used in various uprisings when Gullahs stood up to regain what was rightfully theirs - freedom.

8. Gullahs and Geechees even joined forces with indigenous or Native American peoples in their efforts to take a stand against the gross violations of their rights. This resulted in over 40 years of war against the United States governing forces and militias, which very few American textbooks refer to. When it is mentioned, it is called "The Seminole Wars". However, it would be more appropriate to call them "The Gullah Wars" given that they were the primary group involved. They formed the group called the "Seminole Nation" as a result of the years of living alongside indigenous Americans and formed a community in which they all lived together, eventually going into the swamps of Florida and later west into what is now Oklahoma and Texas in the United States and into Mexico.

9. Gullah people who were forced to live on the mainland as servants or who later migrated there after the Civil War speak a dialect of the Gullah language called "Geechee". Just as they have picked up the "dominant" language of the United States - English - they have been forced to lose many of the ways that they had when they were on the islands. Gullahs and Geechees have been denied any education in the Gullah language. Most have not ever been taught any of the aspects of their history. They were told that the way they spoke was backward and ignorant and to get anywhere in life they had to stop speaking like that and learn "proper English".

10. Given the fact that this community has been encroached upon from the time of the arrival of soldiers and missionaries during the Civil War until today, with the onslaught of resort and retirement areas, they have had other groups of people superimpose different cultural mores upon them. Children have been taught in a system designed by outsiders to focus on Anglo-American history, with little mention of people of African descent beyond calling them "slaves", and then mentioning two to five other people that are considered "African Americans of note".

11. The people who built the foundation of African American culture are not mentioned in classrooms. Their language is still misunderstood and thus not considered to be acceptable for academic and "professional" arenas. They have even been told in political and legal forums that there is no such "culture" as theirs. Clifford Geertz wrote, "Community is a culturally defined way of life". Gullah and Geechee people were able to survive chattel slavery with their language, spiritual expressions, crafts and skills intact because of strength, adaptability and faith. Their adaptability has made them masters of "code switching" which allowed them to keep their culture, language and community protected by hiding them.

12. During the Civil War, General Sherman issued Special Field Order 15 which declared that the islands would be reserved for the Gullah alone, United States military authority and the acts of Congress ... This field order was later rescinded and the land was never given to the Gullah, many of

whom, however, bought plots at auction. Once the Anglo former slave owners received word in the North, where many of them ran when they found out that we were possibly going to be freed, many of them began lawsuits to try to take land back. Today we are still fighting to remain on our land, to preserve our language and customs, and to have people know of our existence before we are eliminated entirely or fenced out of our own homes.

13. Wealth developers have built "gated communities" throughout the Sea Islands and left cultural destruction in their wake. Our graveyards and burial grounds have been desecrated. Grave markers have been removed and areas levelled. Clubhouses, golf courses and other recreational facilities for affluent people have been placed on top of graves. This has continued in spite of lawsuits. Pollution of the waterways and soil has destroyed traditional crafts and means of survival.

14. The Gullah approached the United States Government to find out what would be needed to designate their home a World Heritage Site; they were told that due to the parameters that the United States has set, that would be impossible. However, there are exceptions to rules and amendments to laws. The assistance of the Commission on Human Rights is sought in order to have the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior of the United States recognize how important it is to preserve this community, which is no doubt of historical significance to people globally.

15. The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition is currently working to obtain funds for land reclamation. This will allow many of the people who have been displaced from the islands to be able to return. The prohibitive prices of real estate or bidding against billion-dollar corporate developers does not allow them to have equal footing in the current battle for ownership of the land where they have lived for generations. The Commission's help is sought to allow the Gullah to continue to be the keepers of their culture.

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