

Obama: Economic Justice is Unfinished Business

From VOA Learning English, this is In The News.

President Barack Obama this week joined hundreds of thousands of Americans across the country in marking the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for civil rights. The president noted what he called “unfinished business” in the struggle for equality and justice in the United States. His comments come at a time when Americans are talking about civil rights and race relations.

Some are still reacting to a Florida court’s decision in the murder trial of George Zimmermann. The jury found the neighborhood watch volunteer not guilty in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American.

On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people marched in Washington for jobs and civil rights. It was the biggest demonstration of its kind. Many people stood outside the Lincoln Memorial to hear speakers talk about civil rights for African Americans.

The march ended with civil rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. giving his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. His comments energized the civil rights movement in the United States and led to important laws, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The law bars major forms of discrimination against minorities and women.

Last Wednesday, the nation's first black president stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Mr. Obama remembered King and the sacrifices of those who marched here in Washington. He said the marchers brought change not only for African Americans, but also for other groups and for those hoping for freedom around the world.

The president's speech marked one of the first times since he took office in 2009 that he has spoken about issues of race. It also came two months after the nation's highest court ruled against part of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Mr. Obama said those who suggest little has changed in America dishonor the marchers of 50 years ago. At the same time, he said work toward racial equality is not complete. The president noted that challenges to voting rights, high unemployment rates and other problems need attention.

"To secure the gains that this country has made requires constant vigilance, not complacency, whether by challenging those who erect new barriers to the vote, or ensuring that the scales of justice work equally for all, and the criminal justice system is not simply a pipeline from under-funded schools to overcrowded jails. It requires vigilance."

The crowd on the National Mall here in Washington also heard from present-day civil rights leaders, movie stars and two former U.S. presidents. Like Mr. Obama, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter belong to the Democratic Party. Mr. Carter also criticized the Supreme Court decision on the Voting Rights Act.

“I believe we all know how Dr. King would have reacted to the new ID requirements to exclude certain voters, especially African Americans. I think we all know how Dr. King would have reacted to the Supreme Court striking down a crucial part of the Voters Rights Act just recently passed overwhelmingly by Congress.”

Another speaker was Martin Luther King’s youngest child, Bernice King. She spoke about her father’s message to “Let Freedom Ring.”

“Today, 50 years later, my friends, we are still crippled by practices and policies steeped in racial pride, hatred and hostility, some of which have us standing our ground rather than finding common ground.”

Some people in the crowd also took part in the 1963 march. They said they are prepared to keep the dream of racial equality alive.

And that’s In The News, from VOA Learning English. I’m Avi Arditti.