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## Noose incidents spark outrage; African Americans blast U.S. congressional hearing over lack of action on discrimination, hate crimes

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Generations of racial hatred, injustice and outrage over the historic treatment of black Americans spilled onto the floor of a Congressional committee hearing room here yesterday.

Emotions were stripped bare as Democratic legislators probed the inequities of the justice system in the tiny Louisiana town of **Jena** and African Americans spoke of the sordid history of the noose, one of the most potent symbols of hate in this country.

Although the hearing was convened to deal with the expansion of hate laws in the U.S., it centred on the treatment of black defendants in Louisiana known as the "**Jena Six**" and a sudden proliferation of incidents involving the noose, symbol of the more than 3,000 lynchings of blacks in this nation from the late 1800s to the 1960s.

"Nooses were used for one thing and one thing only," said Charles Ogletree, the director of Harvard Law School's Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice.

"In the history of this country, (they were) used ... to lynch black women and men. I hope we don't bury the history that comes with what this symbolizes. This is one of the most destructive, mean-spirited, racist examples of individual behaviour."

Racial tensions began rising in **Jena** more than a year ago after a black student sat under a "white tree" and three white students later hung two nooses from the tree.

The white students were suspended from the school, but **six** black students were later charged under the state's justice system following a fight sparked by the noose incident the following December.

One black student, Mychal Bell, was unexpectedly sent back to prison last week during what he expected to be a routine hearing after a judge determined he had violated the terms of his probation for a previous conviction.

Since 20,000 civil rights activists descended on the town last month to protest what they believe to be two systems of justice in Louisiana, a spate of noose incidents have been reported.

One was dragged from the back of a truck in **Jena** the night of the demonstration, another was placed near the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks in New York, another at a Long Island police detachment and one was found dangling from the office door of a Columbia University professor.

Still more incidents have been reported in North Carolina, Maryland, Connecticut and California.

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Nooses "don't just hurt the three or five or seven black children under the tree," Ogletree said. "It hurts all of us, every single one of us."

Much of the anger from witnesses and black Democrats was the lack of a response to the situation in **Jena** from the Bush administration and the failure of the federal justice department to right the wrongs of the Louisiana system.

One black Democratic legislator assailed a black U.S. attorney for inaction on the case, drawing shouts and applause from the room, and a Republican accused civil rights leader Al Sharpton of sowing racial disharmony in the United States.

Some spectators began chanting for the House judiciary committee to subpoena the prosecutor in the case, Reed Walters.

Sharpton told the committee there are **Jenas** everywhere in the United States.

"We have not heard one federal response," he said. "It is almost like the national government is not in the country while we're watching nooses on the news every night, while we're watching hate crimes."

"The justice department, at the behest of this committee, needs to step into **Jena and the Jenas** of this country and establish that the federal government is still in charge and the states did not win the Civil War."

Sharpton and others said hate laws should be expanded to include juveniles. The white students in **Jena** were not prosecuted because they were under 18.

Before Sharpton belatedly appeared - his flight from New York was delayed - North Carolina Republican Howard Coble took a shot at the civil rights leader in absentia.

"If I were compiling a group of witnesses to encourage the diminishing of racial disharmony, I don't know that Mr. Sharpton would have made my cut," Coble said.

Sheila Jackson-Lee, a Democrat from Texas, lashed out at federal officials for not intervening and restoring justice in **Jena**.

"Shame on you," she said, reserving most of her venom for Donald Washington, the black U.S. attorney for the **Jena** district.

"As a parent, I'm on the verge of tears," she said.

"Why didn't you intervene? These broken lives could have been prevented if you had taken the symbolic responsibility that you have, being the first African-American appointed to the (Louisiana) western district."

"I don't know what else to say. I am outraged."

Washington defended himself, saying he did intervene, but is restricted by the law.

"I, too, am an African-American and I was very offended by what I heard (in **Jena**)," he said.

"I am a child of the '60s, of the desegregation era. My mother marched, I'm sure like your parents did, in the 1960s when Martin Luther King was urging African-Americans to get out and march for their rights."

**LOAD-DATE:** October 17, 2007

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**GRAPHIC:** SEAN GARDNER reuters file photo A **Jena**, La., marcher's placard depicts a noose and a black woman wrapped in a U.S. flag as demonstrators rally in support of the "**Jena Six**" last month.

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