Written by James Wright, Special to the NNPA from the Afro-American Newspapers
Tuesday, 21 July 2009 14:36

(NNPA) - Nelson Mandela, the political activist imprisoned 27 years for fighting against apartheid South Africa before becoming the first Black president of that country, was honored throughout the world July 18 on the occasion of his 91st birthday. There were concerts and works of community service in honor of Mandela, as well as a push by his foundation to mark his birthday as a worldwide day of observance.

Gerald LeMelle, executive director of Africa Action, a D.C.-based pro-Africa development organization, said Mandela's life's work has made a difference in the lives of so many people. "His leadership and courage in making South Africa a more just society lives on through his work for a robust civil society on the continent," he said.

The first lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, sang at a birthday celebration for Mandela in New York in her first public concert since she married the president of France. She performed alongside such artists as Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Queen Latifah and Alicia Keys at Radio City Music Hall before a full auditorium.

Former President Bill Clinton hosted a fundraiser for Mandela and spent part of his day in community service in New York City.

In South Africa, Mandela spent the day with family and friends. However, throughout his country, South Africans set aside 67 minutes of their time in community service as a symbolic tribute.

The number 67 represents the years Mandela dedicated to fighting for freedom and rights. "This day is symbolic in terms of the commitment he showed in his life and he hopes people work not only on Mandela Day, but every day in their communities to uplift those in need," said Ruth Rensburg, who works for the Nelson Mandela Foundation and 46664, named for the five digit number that was Mandela's while he was incarcerated.

"Mr. Mandela once said, 'It is in your hands to create a better world for all who live in it.' Mandela Day will not be a holiday, but a day dedicated to service," said Rensburg.

South African President Joseph Zuma visited a home for the elderly and members of parliament painted government buildings and cleaned up communities by picking up trash and washing away graffiti.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has endorsed the idea of officially recognizing Mandela Day, but has not asked the parliament to act on it. The White House press office had no comment on the prospect of a Mandela Day in the United States.