

Thousands Rally on DC as Nation of Islam Leader Pronounces Divine Judgment on America

Thousands of people gathered in front of the U.S. Capitol on Saturday for a rally led by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March on Washington and decry racial and economic injustice.

Farrakhan joined a number of speakers at the "Justice or Else" march. They addressed a largely African-American crowd that stretched for hundreds of yards from the steps of the Capitol.

Speakers at the rally, which followed a number of high-profile deaths of black men at the hands of police, called for reforms to law enforcement's use of force and greater access for poor people to health care and higher education.

During his more than two-hour speech, Farrakhan urged listeners to avoid sexual immorality, abortion and violence, even as he criticized "white supremacy" and said the United States could face a series of natural calamities.

"America has now entered the time of divine judgment," Farrakhan said.

In 1995, Farrakhan led the Million Man March in Washington, which drew about 800,000 people, according to private researchers, and marked a significant moment for African-American political activism in the United States.

His Justice or Else march on Saturday drew a far smaller crowd

that numbered in the thousands. Many watched speakers on jumbo screens.

A representative for the National Park Service declined to provide a crowd estimate.

President Barack Obama, who then taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago, attended the Million Man March in 1995.

Some speakers at the rally said the United States is making progress in resolving racial inequalities, such as by electing Obama in 2008 as the nation's first black president.

However, they also described other instances of racial inequality, such as U.S. immigration policies they said were unfair to Hispanics.

Ava Muhammad, a Black Muslim minister and spokeswoman for Nation of Islam, struck an aggressive tone during her speech.

"The Koran says fight with those who fight with you," she told the crowd.

Farrakhan, 82, has led the Nation of Islam since 1977.

In the past, his rhetoric has been criticized as strident and prejudiced toward Jews and gays, and he has called white people "devils."

Members of the audience said they drew inspiration from the rally.

R.J. Moss, a 34-year-old Atlanta attorney, said he attended the Million Man March rally 20 years ago.

"The message is the same, come together, respect one another, love one another," he said. {eoa}