

Thousands gather 60 years after Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream speech

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Washington, August 26 (RHC)-- Thousands of Americans converged on the US capital to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington, a pivotal event in the 1960s civil rights movement at which Martin Luther King Jr gave his galvanising “I Have a Dream” speech.

The 1963 march brought more than 250,000 people to the nation’s capital to push for an end to discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Many credit the show of strength with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Organised by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights groups, this year’s march takes place at the Lincoln Memorial, the backdrop to King’s impassioned call for equality.

Margaret Huang, the president and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center nonprofit civil rights advocacy group, told the crowd on Saturday the march 60 years ago opened doors and spurred new tools to fight racial discrimination.

But new laws throughout the country that “claw away at the right to vote” and target the LGBTQ community threaten to erase some of those gains, Huang said. “These campaigns against our ballots, our bodies, our school books, they are all connected. When our right to vote falls all other civil and human rights can fall too, but we’re here today to say ‘not on our watch.’”

Kimberle Crenshaw, executive director of the African American Policy Forum, said the anniversary occurred at a troubling moment. “The very history that the march is commemorating is being not only challenged but distorted,” Crenshaw said, referring to bans in several states on books and classroom instruction based on so-called “critical race theory”, which views a legacy of racism as shaping American history.

She called that and other moves such as the removal of an African American studies course from public schools in Florida and Arkansas a “concerted effort to silence conversation about that history”.

Opponents of critical race theory have argued it distorts history and is needlessly divisive and upsetting for students.

Speakers at the march include civil rights leaders such as the Reverend Al Sharpton, King’s son Martin Luther King III, his granddaughter Yolanda Renee King and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries.

In terms of the goals envisioned in King’s “dream”, the country has come a long way since 1963, said Jonathan Greenblatt, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, which played a role in the campaign for the Civil Rights Act’s enactment.

But, he said, recent Supreme Court rulings setting back affirmative action and access to abortion were a cause for concern. “We’ve seen an expansion of anti-Semitism, we’ve seen an intensification of racism,” said Greenblatt.

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