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Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. Statement
on the
Recent Public Attacks on National Civil Rights Organizations

Washington, DC (August 11, 2014) – Over the last few weeks, almost all of the nation’s leading national civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, National Urban League, the Minority Media and Telecommunications Council (MMTC), LULAC and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, have been unfairly attacked by progressive and conservative media outlets for their stance on the Federal Communications Commission’s open Internet proceeding. One blog post went as far as to suggest that national civil rights organizations are acting as “shills” and “sell outs” to the interests of large corporations. As a leader of one of the civil rights groups under attack, I find these labels to be highly offensive, inciting and creating deeper divisions between social justice groups and advocates who are working toward the same goals of social justice and equity.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose name has been loosely referenced in many of these articles, always strived for civility. In the face of the most contentious racial and economic debates, Dr. King always maintained dignity. Even when he delivered what would be his most controversial speech decrying the Vietnam War, he upheld the core values of compassion, suggesting that much is to be gained by understanding rather than denouncing the opposition.

While some may believe that these fundamental tenets no longer have a place in a society riddled with conflict, I beg to differ. Civility has a central place in our democracy. It directs us to stop discrediting and devaluing our opponents as we debate the substantive merits of both sides. Civility also encourages mainstream, progressive, conservative and social media to employ these same values, because tabloid sensationalism is neither civil nor fair.

The civil rights community realizes that obtaining first class digital citizenship is essential to the achievement of the American dream. Access to broadband and the platforms that it enables are the new runway for equal opportunity. The stakes are high in this open Internet debate for people of color and we cannot be silent. Civil rights organizations that have traditionally been the moral conscience of the disenfranchised, discouraged and disempowered must continue to represent their voice on this issue as we do on others. Calling into question the legitimacy of our groups only is morally reprehensible, and attempts to diminish our value on a range of issues we currently address from brutality to voting rights is wrong.

When we’re civil, we can have a dialogue about our differences that does not negate and ignore the power of the other side. We can disagree without dehumanizing others and sending

mainstream media mobs to launch targeted smear campaigns on organizations and their leaders. These efforts are counterproductive to a framework of civility and compromise future collaborations on the range of civil rights concerns that threaten the quality of life in our communities.

I urge that we resist these unwarranted tactics and begin to treat each other in this debate as human beings. Upon reflection, Dr. King was a master at surfacing the hypocrisy in the arguments of our oppressors while respecting their humanity. We must operate in the same manner.

Civility in this and other debates is not just fair; it is the right thing to do.

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The Rainbow PUSH Coalition is a progressive organization protecting, defending and expanding civil rights to improve economic and educational opportunity. The organization is headquartered at 930 E. 50th St. in Chicago. To learn more about the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, please visit www.rainbowpush.org, or telephone (773) 373-3366. For more information about the Peachtree Street Project and the Create Opportunity Conference, please call the number listed above.