No pardon for Garvey

THE Barack Obama administration has flatly rejected a request for a presidential pardon for Jamaica's first national hero, the Right Honourable Marcus Mosiah Garvey.

Garvey was imprisoned for mail fraud totalling US$25 in June 1923, and after spending two years and nine months in an Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, was deported from New Orleans, Louisiana to Jamaica on a ship. Florida-based Jamaican-born attorney Donovan Parker has been writing to president Obama every week since January requesting a posthumous pardon for Garvey, who many believe was set up by the J Edgar Hoover-led Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), fearful of his widening popularity among downtrodden US blacks. The Sunday Observer has acquired a copy of one letter sent by Parker to the US President, and the first ever reply from the White House on the matter . "Marcus Mosiah Garvey is also a National Hero of Jamaica, West Indies and a leading forebear of the African American civil rights experience," wrote Parker. "It is full time that this extraordinary human being of humble beginnings and strong moral character be pardoned by the pen of an American president. It would be fitting if both you, Mr President, and the first lady visit Jamaica for the purposes of signing the executive order pardoning Marcus Mosiah Garvey." In a tersely worded reply to Parker's request, White House Pardon Attorney, Ronald Rodgers said such a move would be a waste of time and resources since Garvey had been dead for ages. "It is the general policy of the Department of Justice that requests for posthumous pardons for federal offences not be processed for adjudication. The policy is grounded in the belief that the time of the officials involved in the clemency process is better spent on pardon and commutation requests of living persons. "Many posthumous pardon requests would likely be based on a claim of manifest injustice, and given that decades have passed since the event and the historical record would have to be scoured to objectively and comprehensively investigate such applications, it is the Department's position that the limited resources which are available to process requests for Presidential clemency -- now being submitted in record numbers -- are best dedicated to requests submitted by persons who can truly benefit from a grant of the request," Rodgers replied on behalf of Obama, who is the first black president in the history of the United States. Parker expressed his utter disappointment at the latest development and called on US ambassador to Jamaica Pamela Bridgewater, to add her voice to the call for Garvey to be officially pardoned. "She should advise Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to strongly recommend an posthumous presidential pardon for the Right Honourable Marcus Mosiah Garvey in the name of human decency and justice. There is no reason why the US government shouldn't do this and Obama shouldn't sign it," Parker said. The Jamaican-born attorney also pointed out that the original transcripts of Garvey's trial cannot be found. "They don't have it. Somebody took it. I was told this by the Jamaican Consul General in Miami, Sandra Grant-Griffiths, who informed me via a letter," he said. He doubted whether President Obama had actually seen the request. "I believe there has been no co-ordinated effort to get this issue in front of the president. I think if President Obama reads it, he will sign it," Parker said. Six years after being deported to his homeland, Garvey was also imprisoned in Jamaica for contempt of court and Culture Minister Olivia 'Babsy' Grange had, earlier this year, signalled her intention to do all within her powers to clear Garvey's name at home and abroad. Grange is reportedly assembling a team of Garveyites and legal minds to deal with this task. Efforts to contact Grange yesterday were unsuccessful, but director of communications in the ministry of youth, culture and sports, Oliver Watt, said the news of the presidential rejection was a hard pill to swallow. "We will be pursuing all the other options available to us. We definitely think his name should be cleared at home and overseas," Watt said. Head of the Marcus Garvey-founded People's Political Party, Miguel Lorne, was also livid as well as disappointed by the rejection of Parker's request. "The language used in the reply is most disdainful. It makes you wonder if Obama actually read the request. Obama must know about Garvey, who is the forerunner of the civil rights movement. It is most disappointing," Lorne told the Sunday Observer. Former Prime Minister Edward Seaga asked the US President, the late Ronald Reagan to grant a full pardon to Marcus Garvey on the 1923 charge of mail fraud. A resolution was brought to the US House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice from as far back as 1987, but the issue seemed to have been pushed on the back burner. Marcus Garvey died in London on June 10, 1940, reportedly after succumbing to the effect of two strokes attributed to his reading a false obituary of himself in a Chicago newspaper which stated, in part, that he died broke, alone and unpopular. His remains were interred at the Kensal Green Cemetery in London. In 1964, his remains were exhumed and re-interred at the National Heroes Park in Kingston and he was named Jamaica's first national hero.