



Remarks

by

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President of the 68th Session of the United Nations

General Assembly

New York

25 March 2014

**Follow-up to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary
of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade: commemorative
meeting on the occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of
the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade [item 120]**

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Madam Chef de Cabinet,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we commemorate the spirit, courage and legacy of millions of men, women and children who were victims of one of the darkest and most abhorrent chapters in history – the Transatlantic Slave Trade. As we gather for this year’s *International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, we call to mind the memory of all those who suffered the cruelty and injustice of the largest forced migration in history.

A number of commemorative activities will be held in observance of this Day and I encourage the support and participation of all Member States.

The theme of this year’s celebration is “*Victory over Slavery: Haiti and Beyond*,” and this year we acknowledge the role of a country synonymous with the quest for freedom against the institution of slavery. The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 is considered by historians to be the most successful and sustained slave revolt to have ever occurred. Led by Toussaint L’Ouverture, and others like Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe, the Haitian revolution was a defining moment in the histories of Europe and the Americas, and culminated in the birth of a new nation, the Republic of Haiti, which celebrated its 210th anniversary in January 2014.

This past September, we acknowledged the Republic of Haiti’s struggle against slavery with the commission for the Permanent Memorial Project, which was awarded to Mr. Rodney Leon, an American architect of Haitian descent. It was my pleasure to participate in that ceremony which recognized the winning design – Mr. Leon’s *The Ark of Return*, and to pay tribute to skilled artists from 83 different countries who participated in this contest with the submission of 310 designs. The Permanent Memorial is not just a symbol of remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, but is also a powerful symbol of human fortitude and courage that led to the breaking of the shackles of slavery and burdens of bigotry.

The Permanent Memorial Committee has informed that the design and construction phase of the Project has commenced, with a view to the unveiling of the Memorial at the start of the 69th Session of the Assembly. I recognize the generous contributions so far made by some Member States to the Permanent Memorial Fund. Regrettably, though, the Fund is still short of the amount required for the completion of this worthy project. And since it was our Assembly that decided that the Memorial should be erected, I urge all Member States to do their utmost and make additional contributions to this eminently worthy project so that it can be brought to finality by the date decided upon.

Excellencies,

Today, we once again gather to honour universal and powerful human truths that wherever peoples are oppressed and crippled by discrimination, there are, and should be peoples who stand up to the oppressors, and speak up against discrimination.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, launched in Ouidah, Benin, in 1994. In many ways, this project broke the silence on slavery and the slave trade by raising our collective awareness. Through the project's intercultural dialogue and activities, research and publications, we know and understand more about the slave trade and its devastating consequences.

More significantly, the project has contributed to the international community's acknowledgement that slavery and the slave trade is a crime against humanity, as determined at the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa. This important recognition can be found in the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action [General Issues – paragraph 13]. In this regard, I am delighted to have with us here today, the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, a former Governor-General of Canada and current UNESCO Special Envoy for Haiti and member of the International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project (2014-2015), who will share her insights with us as the key presenter on this Day of remembrance. We will also be treated to a cultural performance by the renowned Haitian singer Emeline Michel.

UNESCO's work in this field is another reminder that we must continue to study the history and legacy of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. The resources and materials available in educational institutions worldwide provide us with an opportunity to explore the causes and consequences of slavery and reflect upon the lessons learned. We can also use the outreach opportunities of this Day to draw attention to the many contributions enslaved Africans made to nation-building, through the application of their knowledge and skills.

Distinguished Delegates,

While we reflect on the past, we must also acknowledge the cruelties that continue to exist today. Foremost, slavery still stalks our planet in many forms and manifestations. Too many innocent women and young girls are held in bondage and are denied their freedom and right to live in dignity due to human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Too many children are held in servitude and are victims of child labour. Combating such abuses is a daunting challenge. We must turn our commitments into concrete action so that women and the young can live without fear and want.

Four (4) days ago, we commemorated the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which speaks to another relevant and pervasive problem in our societies. The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade reminds us of the continued dangers of racism, injustice and prejudice; and it speaks to the work we still have to do in this regard.

Later this year, during the 69th session, we will launch the International Decade for Peoples of African Descent [1 January 2015 to 31 December 2024] under the theme "People of African descent: recognition, justice and development". Historical injustices have undeniably contributed to inequality and economic disparities, marginalization and social exclusion faced by people of African descent in different parts of the world. During last week's commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, we heard that many Member States have undertaken initiatives at the national level to ensure full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by people of African descent in all spheres.

Let us use the opportunity of the Decade, to continue our fight for a world free of racism and discrimination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a community of Nations, it is our responsibility to address the root causes of modern day slavery, to provide protection and assistance to the victims, and to ensure that there is no impunity for the perpetrators of such practices. By our continued and sustained efforts to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery, as well as racism and racial discrimination, we move forward down the path of dignity, decency, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

Thank you.
