

25 March 2008

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim,
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly,
on the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the
Transatlantic Slave Trade**

Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honor to give the following statement on behalf of the President of the 62nd session of the General Assembly.

The President deeply regrets that he was not able to be here in person to celebrate such an important event, as he is currently on an official visit in Europe.

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of today's event – the Caribbean Community, the African Union, the European Union, the United States Mission and the Department of Public Information.

We are here today, because last year Member States of the General Assembly adopted a resolution designating 25th March as an annual day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The Assembly also decided to erect a permanent memorial at the United Nations to acknowledge the tragedy and consider the legacy of slavery. I would like to thank those who have contributed to the memorial fund and invite other interested parties to do so too.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Slavery is a deplorable fact of human history. Evidence of slavery predates written records. It can be found in almost all cultures and continents.

It has been legitimated by racism and extreme discrimination, or just social convention and economic opportunism.

Last year, we came together to hold a special commemoration to celebrate 200 years since the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. That day marked the beginning of the end for the transatlantic traffic in human beings.

The forced removal from Africa of 25 million between 1500 to 1900 had a significant effect on the continent. This was a crime against humanity.

This day of remembrance offers us all a chance to acknowledge how profoundly shameful the colonial slave trade was, and to remember the millions who suffered. It also gives us the opportunity to pay tribute to the courage and moral conviction of all those who campaigned for abolition.

However, while coming to terms with past injustices, we also need to recognise the unspeakable cruelty that persists today.

Slavery in its modern form comes in many guises - such as bonded labour and slavery by descent, forced recruitment of child labour and child soldiers, human trafficking and the illegal sex trade.

An estimated 5.7 million children are victims of forced and bonded labour, and 1.2 million children are victims of child trafficking.

Around 300,000 children are currently being exploited as child soldiers in over 30 areas of conflict around the world.

The International Organization for Migration estimates that annually 700,000 women, girls, men and boys are trafficked across borders away from their homes and families and forced into slavery.

Linked to trafficking is the commercial sexual exploitation of children of whom 1 million, mainly girls, are forced into prostitution every year. These girls are sold for sex or used in child pornography in both the developed and the developing world.

If we sincerely want to honour the suffering that slaves experienced and died under in the past, we must do much more to protect and promote the human rights, freedom and dignity of all people, in particular, those who continue to suffer under modern forms of slavery.

This is the basic premise of the first Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 4 states that:

‘No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.’

However, trafficking in persons remains a major challenge even in the 21st century. It poses a serious threat to both our human dignity and human security.

The time has come to make a decisive declaration of political will to defeat human trafficking. The General Assembly is uniquely positioned to accomplish this task.

That is why I intend to convene a special meeting of the General Assembly on Human Trafficking on 3rd June.

We need to raise awareness about the scale of the problem, promote international partnerships and consider how best the UN system working with all stakeholders can tackle this issue.

As Martin Luther King Jr. – the great civil rights activist – once memorably said,

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Thank you very much for your attention.