

25 March 2013

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery
and the Transatlantic Slave Trade**

Delivered by His Excellency Ambassador Ken Kanda, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Ghana

Mr. Secretary-General,
Minister of Arts and Culture Ama Tutu Muna of Cameroon,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to offer these remarks on behalf of the President of the General Assembly, His Excellency Mr. Vuk Jeremic, who is on official travel. He has asked me to convey his deep regret at not being able to join us today.

We are here to commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

I would like to recognize the role of the Member States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the African Group for their sustained commitment to this annual commemoration.

This is the sixth occasion on which we have marked this sombre day, following the adoption of General Assembly Resolution 62/122 in 2007.

The International Day of Remembrance focuses the world's attention on the unprecedented horror of the slave trade, providing us all with an opportunity to collectively and solemnly reflect on the seemingly limitless scope of man's inhumanity to man.

It is almost unimaginable that an estimated 15 million people were forcibly removed from the African continent in the four centuries between 1500 and 1900. The suffering of every man, woman and child will forever rest on the conscience of humanity.

We should all be aware that the profound social and economic inequality, hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice, which many people of African descent around the world continue to endure today, is a distressing and stubborn legacy of this heinous trade in human beings.

Excellencies,

The theme of this year's remembrance is "Forever Free: Celebrating Emancipation." It pays tribute to those courageous men and women of all colors who worked so tirelessly to focus public opinion on the fact that the slave trade was depraved and immoral a corruption of the human spirit. It was the determination and steadfast conviction of all those people who campaigned for abolition to whom we owe so much today.

It had been a long and arduous journey to freedom. One of the most significant steps was the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by Britain in 1807. A young Member of Parliament, William Wilberforce, saw, early on, what the world did not the brutal inhumanity of slavery and the morally indefensible notion that one man could own the flesh and blood of another. Addressing the British House of Commons in 1789 about the barbaric conditions in which slaves were transported he said: "So much misery condensed in so little room is more than the human imagination had ever before conceived."

Wilberforce dedicated much of his life to securing the right to freedom of all men, but he died before the ultimate goal of the abolition of slavery was achieved. It took more than 50 years before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by United States President Abraham Lincoln.

Today, we solemnly remember those millions who did not live to enjoy the freedom for which people like Wilberforce, Lincoln and so many unsung heroes fought.

Excellencies,

A General Assembly resolution to create a permanent memorial to and remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade was adopted in 2007 to acknowledge the tragedy and enduring consequences of the enslavement of African peoples.

I welcome the efforts made by CARICOM, the Africa Group, and the Permanent Memorial Committee led by the Permanent Representative of Jamaica, to realize this cenotaph to the millions whose freedom was forcibly taken. The office of the President of the General Assembly stands ready to assist this noble and necessary project in any way it can.

It is fitting that this resolution calls not only for a permanent and physical reminder of the slave trade, but also a program to mobilize educational institutions and civil society to teach future generations about the causes, consequences and lessons of the transatlantic slave trade.

Excellencies,

While reflecting on this dark period of the history of subjugation, we also need to acknowledge that the unspeakable horror of slavery persists, albeit in different forms, in the 21st century.

In honoring those people who worked for the emancipation of enslaved peoples, let us work to protect and promote human rights today.

Forced labor and child labor, the trafficking of persons, the recruitment of child soldiers, the sexual exploitation of women, have all been identified by the United Nations as contemporary forms of slavery.

Thankfully, modern enslavement is neither as systematic nor institutionalized as its historic form, but nevertheless, its very existence is a grave blemish on the natural law of mankind. It is also in contravention of Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which declares freedom from slavery as an internationally recognized human right.

Such crimes are frequently clandestine, so it is difficult to gauge where and how they are committed and, correspondingly, to take appropriate action to punish the perpetrators and eliminate their grotesque practice.

The majority of those people who suffer belong to the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalized social groups in society. Fear, and the need to survive, may explain why victims rarely speak out.

This meeting of nations of the General Assembly, this great pantheon of hope for humanity, must play an active role to ensure slavery is ultimately eradicated once and for all time.

Excellencies,

The brave men and women who championed the emancipation of slaves throughout history are being recognized today. They transformed their strongly held beliefs in the freedom of mankind into stirring words and those words, into epoch-making deeds.

I would like to end by quoting one of the world's most celebrated emancipators, President Abraham Lincoln.

He said: "Whenever I hear anyone arguing over slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally."

I am of the firm belief that those words were as relevant when he uttered them in 1865 as they are today.

Thank you for your attention.