

UN General Assembly Adopts Resolution Welcoming 'Ark of Return' as Permanent Memorial to Victims of Slavery, Transatlantic Slave Trade

Seventieth Session, 46th Meeting (AM), General Assembly, Meetings Coverage: Delegates Conclude Their Consideration of Revitalization of Assembly's Work, November 4, 2015.

The General Assembly would welcome the erection of the *Ark of Return* — the permanent memorial to honour the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade — in a prominent place at United Nations Headquarters that would be easily accessible to delegates, staff and visitors, according to a draft resolution it adopted today.

By other terms of the text — which the Assembly adopted without a vote, as it met to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade — the permanent memorial would be erected in acknowledgement of and consideration of the legacy of slavery.

Also by the text, the Assembly would further express gratitude to the committee of interested States, drawn from all the world's geographical regions, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), representatives of the Secretariat and civil society, which had overseen the permanent memorial project.

Further by the text, the Assembly would request the Secretary-General to continue to organize an annual series of activities to commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, including a commemorative meeting of the General Assembly at Headquarters and, as appropriate, activities through the network of United Nations information centres.

By other terms, the Assembly would request that the Secretariat's Department of Public Information, in cooperation with the countries concerned, relevant organizations and entities of the United Nations system, continue to take appropriate steps to enhance world public awareness of the commemorative activities and the permanent memorial. The Secretary-General would also be requested to report to the General Assembly at its seventy-third session on continued action to implement a programme of educational outreach, including actions taken by Member States in implementing the present resolution.

Also by the text, the United Nations Office for Partnerships, through the Secretary-General, would be requested to submit a comprehensive report to the General Assembly at its seventy-first session on the status of the Trust Fund and, in particular, on contributions received and their utilization. The Assembly would decide to include, in the provisional agenda of its seventy-first session, the item “Commemoration of the abolition of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade”.

Mogens Lykketoft (Denmark), President of the General Assembly, commended the Department of Public Information in his opening remarks for having selected the theme “Women and slavery” for the 2015 commemoration. Slave women had suffered three-fold, being considered black in a white society, slaves in a free society and women in a society ruled by men, he said, adding that the struggles of millions of descendants of enslaved Africans had not ended. The current challenge was to fight all forms of discrimination, including gender discrimination, and to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery, such as sexual slavery, of which women and girls were the primary victims.

Jamaica’s representative, presenting the draft resolution “Permanent memorial to and remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade” (document A/70/L.5), said the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and African States had collaborated with a wide range of partners to arrive at a text that truly reflected the consensus that the text had enjoyed over the years. Since the Assembly’s last consideration of the agenda item under discussion, the permanent memorial had been completed and unveiled on 25 March 2015, on time and on budget. However, the work did not cease, she emphasized, pointing out that there remained broad scope for actions to teach present and future generations about the true nature of slavery and how it had been sustained, opposed and finally defeated.

Sierra Leone’s representative, speaking on behalf of the African Group, said that in commemorating the lives lost to slavery and the slave trade, the international community should also celebrate the resilience of the descendants. The tide of slavery had receded, but had not quite gone away, he cautioned, emphasizing that the international community must make sure that a world without slavery truly came about.

Several delegations underscored the need to protect the human rights of the descendants of enslaved Africans, with some calling for reparations to redress the horrific injustices of the past. Colombia’s representative noted that the descendants had trodden a long path to claim their rights. The 2015-2024 International Decade for People of African Descent proclaimed by the Assembly in its resolution 68/237 had opened a window for reparations in that regard.

Cuba’s representative quoted Fidel Castro’s address at the 2001 World Conference against Racism, recalling that the former Cuban President had stated that inhuman exploitation had affected the destiny and lives of more than 4 billion people in the developing world. The descendants of African slaves needed reparations, and developed countries, which had been the beneficiaries of slavery and terrible exploitation, should compensate them.

Several other Latin American delegations highlighted the valuable contributions that descendants of African slaves had made to the cultural and ethnic diversity of their nations.

In other business today, the Assembly concluded its general debate on the revitalization of its work, which had commenced yesterday.

Other speakers today were representatives of India, Israel, United Republic of Tanzania, United States, Kazakhstan, Argentina, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, San Marino and Croatia. A representative of the European Union also spoke. The General Assembly will meet again at 10 a.m. on Thursday, 5 November, to consider the reports of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

Background

Meeting this morning to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the General Assembly had before it two reports of the Secretary-General (documents A/70/221 and A/70/136) and a related draft resolution (document A/70/L.5). It was also expected to conclude its general debate on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly.

Opening Remarks

Mogens Lykketoft (Denmark), President of the General Assembly, opened the meeting by saying that today's debate was an excellent opportunity to reflect on history, lessons learned and progress made since the abolition of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved Africans and their descendants should be honoured and their contributions to the world recognized, he said, noting that the Secretary-General's latest report highlighted educational outreach and public awareness efforts undertaken in that regard.

Commending the Department of Public Information for having selected the theme "Women and slavery" for the 2015 commemoration, he noted that a slave woman was black in a white society, a slave in a free society and a woman in a society ruled by men. Despite the hardships, however, enslaved African women had preserved and passed on the culture and traditions that formed an integral part of the present-day African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean.

He went on to point out that, while significant progress had been achieved since the abolition of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, the struggles of millions of descendants of enslaved Africans had not ended. The current challenge was to fight all forms of discrimination, including institutional racism and gender discrimination and to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery, including the sexual slavery of which women and girls were the primary victims. Many of those issues lay at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the implementation of which must be a priority for all Governments, he emphasized.

Introduction of Draft Resolution

Shorna-Kay Richards (Jamaica) introduced the draft resolution “Permanent memorial to and remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade” (document A/70/L.5). By its terms, the General Assembly would welcome the erection of the *Ark of Return* in a place of prominence at United Nations Headquarters that would be easily accessible to delegates, staff and visitors, as the permanent memorial to honour the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, and in acknowledgement of the tragedy and in consideration of the legacy of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

She said the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and African States had collaborated with a wide range of partners to arrive at a text that truly reflected the consensus that the text had enjoyed over the years. Since the Assembly’s last consideration of the agenda item under discussion, the permanent memorial had been completed and unveiled on 25 March 2015, on time and on budget.

However, the work did not cease, she emphasized, noting that there remained broad scope for actions to teach present and future generations about the true nature of slavery and how it had been sustained, opposed and finally defeated. Social, economic and psychological scars needed healing in order for the international community to move forward, she stressed, noting that, while some of that healing must of necessity come from within, much more must undeniably come from outside.

Statements

Rattan Lal Kataria, Member of Parliament from India, said the evil of slavery was deeply rooted in economic greed, recalling his own country’s own tragedy of colonialism and the export of indentured labour. That practice had been initiated to replace freed slaves in British colonies during the 1830s, he added. India had contributed \$260,000 to the Memorial Trust Fund and was happy to have been a co-sponsor of the draft resolution since 2007. The Slave Route Project of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) continued to raise awareness of the history and consequences of the transatlantic slave trade. The recognition of 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent provided the United Nations with an opportunity to spotlight the important contribution made by people of African descent to modern societies, he said.

Mordehai Amihai Bivas (Israel) said that, with the unveiling of the *Ark of Return*, visitors and diplomats would be starkly reminded of the unnamed millions who had endured unspeakable suffering. By adopting today’s resolution, Member States were recognizing the indomitable spirit of millions of slavery’s victims.

Noting how the holiday of Passover recalled the Jewish people's 400 years of bitter slavery and celebrated the joy of regaining freedom, he said that a key part of that holiday was relating the story to the next generation. Teaching the past informed present and future actions and it was necessary to recognize that the long arm of slavery continued to touch the modern world. The most fitting tribute to slavery's victims was to fight against modern-day slavery in all its forms, he stressed.

Noel Kaganda (United Republic of Tanzania), associating himself with the African Group, stated that the *Ark of Return* would help visitors to United Nations Headquarters appreciate the tragedy of slavery in general, and the transatlantic slave trade in particular. Noting that modern forms of slavery existed in many parts of the world, he said that, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), "around 21 million men, women and children globally lived in some form of slavery, generating a profit of \$150 billion a year to unscrupulous operators and gangs". Furthermore, since poverty and conflict exposed vulnerable members of society to myriad misfortunes, including modern-day slavery, those challenges must be addressed, including in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2063 Agenda of the African Union, he declared.

Miguel C. Ruiz Blanco (Colombia) noted that the Durban Declaration recognized slavery as an atrocious tragedy due to its magnitude and horror. The transatlantic slave trade should be classified as a crime against humankind. He commended the resolution's adoption and said that his delegation would join its group of co-sponsors. Descendants of African slaves had taken a long path to claim their rights. They enriched the cultural traditions of many countries, including Colombia, he said, noting that the country's language, cuisine and art had been influenced by the descendants of African slaves. The 2015-2024 Afro decade opened a window for reparations, he said, adding that the human rights of Afro-descendants must be promoted and protected. Colombia had launched, on 21 May, a national campaign called "Time against Racism", and had enshrined in law a 10-year plan for the country's Afro-Colombian population, he said.

Cassandra Butts (United States) praised the Memorial now standing in the grounds of United Nations Headquarters, noting that her delegation had contributed to and supported that crucial project, which had also benefited from the particular leadership of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) nations. As a multicultural society, the United States believed in spreading awareness of all who had fallen victim to slavery, she said. Noting that many historical leaders of the abolitionist movement had been black women, she said the sacrifices of the past still lingered. Every day, United Nations delegates and tour groups would experience the *Ark of Return*, she said, adding that it was a reminder not only of the injustices of the past, but also a reminder that the international community must continue to study the legacy of slavery, which must never be forgotten.

Akan Rakhmetullin (Kazakhstan) said that 21 million men, women and children around the world were currently in some form of contemporary slavery. Kazakhstan condemned genocide, racial segregation and all forms of discrimination, propaganda and agitation towards racial, national and religious superiority, he said. Some 130 ethnic groups and 20 religious denominations lived in Kazakhstan, and the country's unique constitutional organ ensured inter-ethnic harmony. Describing the transatlantic slave trade as one of the most tragic pages of human history, he said it had lasting consequences, having severely damaged human rights and international law. That erosion of the latter demanded that the United Nations reaffirm its commitment to its own cornerstone principles, he emphasized.

Oscar León Gonzalez (Cuba) said the consequences of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade were evident in his country, as in other Latin American nations. Some 1,300,000 people had arrived in Cuba, torn away from families sold into slavery. Citing Cuba's multicultural identity, he said the country had started the process of integration in 1959. The Cuban people were a mixture of Hispanics and Africans, and were proud of their African origins, he said, adding that their culture had been enriched by the legacy of African slaves. As Fidel Castro had pointed out during the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, inhuman exploitation had affected the destiny and lives of more than 4 billion people in the developing world. Poverty, unemployment and disease were rampant in those countries and their peoples were victims of centuries of barbarism. The descendants of African slaves needed reparations, he said, noting that developed countries had been the beneficiaries of slavery and terrible exploitation. CARICOM's request for compensation was just. Developing countries required special and differentiated treatment in economic and international relations.

Vandi Chidi Minah (Sierra Leone), speaking on behalf of the African Group, expressed gratitude for Jamaica's leadership by which had led to the establishment of the *Ark of Return*. As the international community commemorated the lives lost, it should also celebrate the resilience of the descendants and educate those who needed to know the lessons of the slave trade. While the tide of slavery had receded, it hadn't quite gone away, he cautioned. The international community must make sure that a world without slavery truly came about. Describing a village in Cuba where he had met descendants of slaves who still sang Sierra Leonean songs, he said that a film crew had recorded them and gone to West Africa to find their origins. The songs had immediately been recognized by people in Sierra Leone, he said, adding that the result of that discovery was that members of the Cuban village had visited the village in Sierra Leone and met those who lived in it. Even though separated by language, "they are we" was one phrase they had managed to get across, he said. Slavery united many in misery, but the resilience of the descendants could make a world in which all wished to live.

Action on Draft Resolution

The General Assembly then adopted, without a vote, the draft resolution entitled “Permanent memorial to and remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade”.

Explanation of Position

The representative of European Union said the Memorial reminded the international community of the tragic legacy of the slave trade and the need to continue the fight against racism and prejudice. The real project now was for the international community to work together in educating and informing current and future generations about the causes, consequences and lessons of slavery and the slave trade. No effort should be spared, he emphasized, adding that the European Union would always be at the forefront in combating all forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

The meeting then resumed consideration of the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly.

Francisco De Antueno (Argentina) said the Assembly was the most representative and democratic body of the United Nations. Its leading role must be reclaimed, while its working methods should be transparent and inclusive. The Office of the President of the Assembly should be strengthened with the necessary financial resources because the current regular budget funding was insufficient. The Trust Fund established in 2010 was not the most effective way to finance the Office, he added. Turning to the selection of the next Secretary-General, he said candidates should include women, adding that it was time to make history in that regard. There was a need to address the timeliness of reports received from the Secretariat, he said, emphasizing that documents should be submitted six weeks in advance, in all six official languages.

Alina Argüello González (Nicaragua), associating herself with the Non-Aligned Movement, reiterated her delegation’s firm commitment to the Assembly’s revitalization and democratization. Democratization was important and the international community must take measures to ensure that the Assembly’s authority was restored. Recalling the flexible approach of resolution 69/321 and its approval by consensus, she said it marked a milestone in that it invited candidates to be circulated to the general membership. It was necessary for the Assembly to be transparent and inclusive so that every country, no matter how small, could feel that its voice was heard, she stressed.

Juan C. Mendoza-García (Costa Rica), associating himself with the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group, said it was with a feeling of urgency that the international community must follow up on resolution 69/321 as well as all relevant resolutions relating to the selection and appointment of the next Secretary-General. Expressing hope that the next Secretary-General would be a woman, he said the election would be decisive for the Organization. While Costa Rica supported the criteria whereby the Security Council must recommend more than one candidate, it would continue to promote the idea of changing the Secretary-General's mandate to one single unrenovable term of seven years.

Nour Zarrouk Boumiza (Tunisia) associated herself with the Non-Aligned Movement, saying that, as the most representative organ of the United Nations, the Assembly must address current challenges, including implementation of applications under the 2030 Agenda and strengthening efforts against terrorism. Reaffirming the importance of improving the content of the annual Security Council report, she also underscored the importance of holding regular meetings of the heads of United Nations entities because that was a means to increase cooperation among them.

Omar Hilale (Morocco), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, said that given the new types of problems and challenges facing the world, such as terrorism and the recurrence of conflicts, there was a need to diversify the Assembly's role. It must be strengthened in order to address effectively the challenges of the twenty-first century. Assembly resolution 69/321 was a step forward in that regard. It was possible to make tangible progress on the revitalization of its working methods, he said, adding that its Main Committees could better coordinate their work. On the selection of the next Secretary-General, he said the fact that the Presidents of the Assembly and the Security Council would send a joint letter to all Member States inviting candidates was a major innovation. Encouraging States to submit their nominees in a timely manner, he emphasized that the principle of geographic distribution must be more balanced. It was also important to provide the Office of the President with proper personnel and adequate resources, thus preserving its institutional memory. The revitalization process required the commitment of Member States and their unflinching political will, he stressed.

Omer Dahab Fadl Mohamed (Sudan), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, said the selection of the next Secretary-General was a concern for many Member States. The Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Assembly's work should discuss that in order to take into account the views of all Member States. The current peace and security challenges in the world required a comprehensive review of the Organization. Sudan welcomed the comprehensive peacekeeping review chaired by José Ramos-Horta and called for the implementation of all its recommendations, he said. It was the duty of all Member States to safeguard the Assembly's authority and mandate, he added, emphasizing that other United Nations entities must not encroach upon its role in peacekeeping.

Daniele D. Bodini (San Marino) said that improved coordination among the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Second Committee (Economic and Financial) could help better fulfil the mandate of the 2030 Agenda and monitor its implementation.

While high-level thematic debates remained important, fewer Assembly events would not only gain greater participation by leaders, but also involve small countries like San Marino in such endeavours. During Assembly debates, more interaction and less formal speeches might create a friendlier environment and a more expeditious path in deliberations, he said. Moreover, the Assembly should not substitute the Security Council in the selection of candidates for Secretary-General.

Vladimir Drobnjak (Croatia), delivering a joint statement on behalf of his own delegation and that of Namibia, said General Assembly resolution 69/321 represented a success for constructive, consensus-oriented work. The seventieth Assembly session would focus on transparency, efficiency and accountability in the work of the Office of the President, while also paying due attention to all other clusters of the revitalization agenda, bearing in mind the latest report of the Ad Hoc Working Group. He said he was at the disposal of Member States for consultations and that the Co-Chairs were considering organizing informal discussions in which delegations could exchange views.

Reference source for the above: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/ga11718.doc.htm>