UN unveils permanent memorial to victims of transatlantic slave trade

25 March - United Nations officials today welcomed the unveiling at the world body’s New York Headquarters of a permanent memorial to the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade which they acknowledged was one of the most horrific tragedies of modern history.

“This memorial stands as a strong and permanent reminder – not only of this gross injustice but of the goals that the UN set for itself 70 years ago,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said at the unveiling. “This poignant and powerful memorial helps us to acknowledge the collective tragedy that befell millions of people. It encourages us to consider the historical legacy of slavery and, above all, it ensures that we never forget.”

He pointed to the UN’s educational work, teaching students about the transatlantic slave trade through the ‘Remember Slavery Programme’ and ensuring they appreciate how intolerance and racism can easily breed acts of hatred and violence.

“I hope descendants of the Transatlantic Slave Trade will feel empowered as they remember those who overcame this brutal system and passed their rich cultural heritage from Africa on to their children,” Mr. Ban said, while also issuing a call to honour women of African descent, noting that a third of those sold as slaves from Africa were female.

“In addition to enduring the harsh conditions of forced labour as slaves, they experienced extreme forms of discrimination and exploitation as a result of their gender,” he said. The theme of the annual International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade this year is ‘Women and Slavery.’

Mr. Ban was joined at the unveiling of the ‘Ark of Return’ by the Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, the memorial’s architect, Rodney Leon, as well as senior UN officials, including General Assembly President Sam Kutesa, who said that slavery remained one of the “darkest and most abhorrent chapters” in world history.
“The majority of the victims of this brutal, primitive trade in human beings remain unnamed and unknown. Nevertheless, their dignity and courage was boundless and worthy of this honour and tribute,” said Mr. Kutesa. “While this may be a solemn occasion, it is also an opportunity to celebrate the legacy of those unknown and unnamed enslaved Africans and honour their proud contribution to our societies, our institutions and our world.”

Recalling the launch last December of the International Decade for People of African Descent, Mr. Kutesa said the ‘Ark of Return’ would be one of the most important contributions of the entire decade.

“The fact that we will unveil it today and have unveiled it today on the first remembrance day of the decade is a major accomplishment,” he said.

He also noted the “deplorable and unacceptable” fact that 21 million people today are subjected to forced labour. “We have an obligation to stop modern slavery in whatever form it may be disguised.”

The Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Irina Bokova, said the memorial stands as a statement of the world’s commitment to breaking the silence around the horrific tragedy of slavery and the slave trade and the millions of people it affected.

“This memorial is a symbol of our determination to pay tribute to these people and their resistance to the slave trade,” she said. “And this memorial is an act of remembrance but it is also a call to action, embodying the principles at the heart of the UN.”

Her words were echoed by the memorial’s designer, Rodney Leon, who also noted the role that his monument could play in educating people.

“It is our solemn responsibility to educate the future generations and to take our responsibilities seriously,” he said. “So this Ark of Return will stand as a constant reminder on the plaza of the United Nations, for all of us, not only to international leaders but also to the most basic of us here to never forget and to never repeat the mistakes of the past.”

### Amid growing crises, UN officials urge protection for war’s youngest victims

**25 March** - The international community must act “collectively and expeditiously” to thwart the growing number of children affected by armed conflicts, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared today, as the Security Council met to discuss the myriad horrors faced by children caught up in wars worldwide.

“We agree that we cannot tolerate a world in which children are killed and maimed, where they are abducted, subject to sexual violence, forced to become soldiers, and where schools and hospitals are attacked,” Mr. Ban said.

Nonetheless, he added, “increasingly, children are snatched from a normal life of school and family, abducted by armed groups and thrown into a life of violence and horror.”

Mr. Ban observed that since he last addressed the Council on the issue in 2014, hundreds of thousands more children had been confronted with the emergence or intensification of conflict, while UN agencies on the ground were verifying more and more cases of child abductions by armed groups.

These children face “some of the worst human rights violations a child can experience,” including death, injury, imprisonment and torture, sexual abuse, forced recruitment and abduction, he added.

Overall, an estimated 230 million children reside in countries and areas where armed groups are fighting and up to 15 million children were impacted by the violence.
“The world’s children are increasingly under threat in theatres of war,” Mr. Ban said. “Last year was considered one of the worst ever for children in areas affected by conflict.”

A report released by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) late last year, in fact, confirmed the “devastating” trend, noting that as violent conflicts proliferate across the globe – in the Central African Republic, Iraq, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and in the occupied Palestinian territories – children were being kidnapped from their schools or on their way to school and recruited or used by armed forces and groups in ever greater numbers.

Despite the sobering details, however, the Secretary-General told the Council that there was a glimmer of hope as the UN better engaged with government and non-State actors to end and prevent violations against children.

“We have seen concrete outcomes of our efforts that have translated into thousands of children now going to school instead of battle and playing in fields instead of fighting on them,” he stated. “By protecting children, we contribute to building durable peace and to helping countries reach their full potential.”

Also addressing the Council, Leila Zerrougui, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, lamented the growing challenges facing the international community “despite the consensus and our combined efforts to spare children the horrors of war.”

“In this start to 2015, it is the violence of armed groups and the brutality with which they treat the children which is our main challenge,” Ms. Zerrougui said. “This is the case in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, but also in other countries. Recurring conflicts have intensified and the expansion of armed groups is assuming alarming proportions.”

The Special Representative noted that out of the 59 parties documented as having committed violations against children, 51 were non-State actors. To that point, she continued, it remained necessary to enter into “constructive dialogue” with the armed groups, in order to dissuade them from continuing in their destructive practices.

Echoing her point, Yoka Brandt, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director, emphasized that voicing outrage was “not enough” but that the international community’s words “must be matched by action to prevent violations of child rights.”

Ms. Brandt admitted that there had been some successes as a number of child soldiers in South Sudan were undergoing demobilization. She underscored, however, that being released was “only a first step” as many children faced struggles when they returned home, such as stigmatization and psychological stress.

The Yazidi children who were recently rescued from the clutches of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), for instance, continued to recount stories of abuse from their time in captivity, she said, adding that they had “experienced the worst of humanity.”

“We can rebuild shattered lives and shattered societies,” Ms. Brandt continued. “As we heal these children, we also heal divided societies.”

Among those addressing the meeting was Junior Nzita Nzuami, who was abducted and forced to fight as a child soldier with rebel forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

He recounted moments of horror during his three years of fighting, as he and other children “shot at and killed everything that moved.” Nonetheless, the experiences, he said, prompted him to dedicate his life to helping his country rebuild a better future and so that what he went through “would no longer happen.”
Libya: new UN report documents targeting of human rights defenders

25 March - Armed groups across Libya have targeted human rights defenders seeking to shed light on abuses, according to a new United Nations report that outlines a litany of violent attacks and threats against defenders in the country, and in some cases even after they are forced to leave.

The joint report produced by the UN human rights office (OHCHR) and the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), documents attacks, including killings, abductions, torture and other ill-treatment, unlawful deprivation of liberty and death threats by phone and on social media since the escalation of fighting in May 2014.

Most recently, prominent civil society activist Entissar al-Hassaeri was shot dead last month in Tripoli, a news release on the report says. Her body and that of her aunt were found in the trunk of her car on 23 February.

In addition, two members of the National Commission for Human Rights-Libya, a non-governmental organization, were abducted on 13 and 14 February in central Tripoli. Both have since been released, but other human rights defenders and members of civil society remain missing or have gone into hiding.

“Given the increasing risks, the killings of prominent human rights defenders and repeated threats, many have fled the country, fallen silent, or have been forced to work in secret at great risk to themselves and their loved ones,” states the report.

It goes on to note that those who managed to flee abroad face a plethora of problems linked to their residency status, expiration of passports with no possibility of extension at some local Libyan consulates, loss of income, and other financial difficulties.

“Some human rights defenders who have fled have explained that they continued to receive death threats on their mobile phones and social media pages. In at least two cases… human rights defenders were physically assaulted in Tunisia, apparently by Libyans.”

In one such case, a media professional and women’s rights defender from Benghazi left the country in late 2014 after numerous threats, including a text message threatening abduction of her son. Her car was struck, apparently deliberately, by another vehicle and a factory she owned was set on fire. She has continued to be outspoken – and has continued to be threatened – after moving abroad.

Another journalist and human rights defender received threats, including of sexual violence, on her Facebook page. “We will … come to your house and break your honour,” read one post. After fleeing Libya in August 2014, she continued to receive threats via Viber and text messages.

“Civilians in Libya, including human rights defenders, have few or no avenues to seek protection or access to remedy for the harm suffered,” the report warns. “The breakdown of law and order has led to the failure of the criminal justice system in some parts of Libya, especially Derna, Benghazi and Sirte, while severe disruptions have been reported elsewhere. Justice sector officials…have been violently targeted by armed groups.”

The murders of several prominent individuals in Benghazi last year, including newspaper editor Muftah Abu Zeid, human rights defender Salwa Bughaigis, and two young civil society activists, Tawfik Bensaud and Sami al-Kawafi, remain unsolved.
Armed groups across political, tribal, regional and ideological divides are responsible for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law and abuses of human rights, including abductions, extra-judicial executions and other unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment, according to the report, which adds that those seeking to document and denounce such violations and abuses have faced reprisals.

The report warns that those committing crimes under international law are criminally liable, including before the International Criminal Court.

Among other measures, the report stresses the crucial need to resume building State institutions, particularly law enforcement agencies and the overall justice system, and for all sides to publicly condemn attacks against civil society members.

Neighbouring countries and the international community should also ensure the protection of Libyan human rights defenders, including by issuing emergency visas and providing temporary shelter, the report urges.

Lowest weekly total of Ebola cases in 2015 reported, UN health agency says

25 March - The first case of Ebola in three weeks was found in Liberia, prompting heightened vigilance, while the United Nations health agency noted some improvements in Guinea, where the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Guinean Scouts held campfire sensitization sessions as part of its efforts to overcome community resistance to health interventions.

“Investigations into the origin of the newly reported case in Liberia are ongoing,” the World Health Organization (WHO) said in its latest update. “Heightened vigilance is being maintained throughout the country” along with efforts to reinforce surveillance networks and cross-border controls.

The one new confirmed case was reported from the greater Monrovia area of Montserrado county, where the patient went to a hospital on 19 March, and was laboratory confirmed as Ebola positive the next day, according to WHO.

The agency went on to say that the patient is not a contact associated with the country’s last confirmed case, who tested negative for a second time on 3 March.

In its latest report, WHO said 79 new confirmed cases of Ebola were reported in the week to 22 March: the lowest weekly total in 2015 from the epidemic in West Africa that has affected nearly 25,000 people with more than 10,000 deaths.

“With the exception of the case in Liberia, transmission has been restricted to districts in and around Conakry to the north and Freetown to the south,” WHO said, referring to the capitals of Guinea and Sierra Leone respectively.

And “response indicators for Guinea suggest some improvements compared with recent weeks,” the agency reported. “Case incidence declined compared with the previous week in every prefecture to have reported a case in the past 21 days.”

However, WHO cautioned, “the fact that fewer than half of cases arose from known contacts, and the number of reported unsafe burials has increased suggests that the outbreak in Guinea continues to be driven by unknown chains of transmission.”

UNICEF conducted several social mobilization and community engagement activities in its fight against Ebola in Guinea, where religious leaders at the Grand Mosque of Kourouss delivered Ebola sensitization messages following the reading of the Quran with 14 imams reaching more than 500 people, the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) said in its daily report.
In partnership with the Guinean Scouts, UNICEF is working to overcome community resistance to Ebola-related humanitarian interventions in numerous locations. And as part of this effort, UNICEF and the Scouts held campfire Ebola sensitization sessions and screened sensitization films during evening gatherings, according to UNMEER.

**FEATURE: Architect of UN slavery memorial explains ‘The Ark of Return’**

25 March - This year’s commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade will have particular significance at United Nations Headquarters in New York, where six years of work to establish a permanent memorial to honour the victims pays off with the unveiling today.

Designed by Rodney Leon, an American architect of Haitian descent who was chosen in 2013 as the winner of an international competition attracting a total of 310 entries from 83 countries, ‘The Ark of Return’ honours the memories of the estimated 15 million men, women and children who were victims of the largest forced migration in history.

“It makes me feel extremely proud that I can play a role and a part in the commemoration of such an important and historic day,” Mr. Leon says in an interview. “I feel really proud that we have a physical marker and a place of remembrance for this annual celebration to take place moving forward.”

Having also been chosen to design the African Burial Ground National Monument in lower Manhattan, erected on a spot where 15,000 people of African origin were buried over a period of around 100 years from the 1690s until 1794, Mr. Leon is familiar with art relating to slavery and the African experience in the Americas.

He also acknowledges that his own background played a powerful role in drawing him to enter the design competition. As a Haitian-American, he says he feels in touch with Haitian liberation and the people’s struggle to be the first independent African state in the western hemisphere.

“My parents were always able to communicate to us as a family in terms of our history and our culture,” he says. “And I think that that plays a role in my being extremely proud of our Haitian and our African heritage. And as a result, when we have these legacies and these opportunities I think I tend to gravitate towards them.”

Having won the competition, Mr. Leon assembled a complex team to tackle the project, which included other architects, as well as structural, mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineers, sculptors, steel workers, lighting designers and people with expertise in building water features.

“It was such an international process, an international project, and that actually makes me feel very good inside,” he says, noting the inclusion of teams of people from the Caribbean, different parts of Africa as well as Europe. “And I think that really speaks about the transcendence of where we have come from in order to be in this place today and how that can become part of like the healing process.”

Designed to pay tribute to the courage of slaves, abolitionists and unsung heroes while promoting greater recognition of the contributions made by slaves and their descendants to societies worldwide, the project’s name, ‘Ark of Return,’ was inspired by maps of the triangular slave trade and by the story of a slave castle on Gorée Island in Senegal.

It was at Gorée Island that slaves were held in captivity before being shipped away. A door at the castle was known as the ‘door of no return,’ and Mr. Leon says the image was a “very tragic” one to him.

“We were also interested in the idea of the slave ships and these vessels that carried people through tragic conditions to the new world,” he says. “So we felt it would be a good counterpoint to establish a spiritual space of return, an ‘Ark of Return,’ a vessel where we can begin to create a counter-narrative and undo some of that experience.”

The aim was not only to document and remember the past but also to look beyond it and move forward into the future,
allowing people to experience the tragedy and simultaneously to communicate and heal.

Ahead of the memorial’s unveiling this week, the UN News Service got a sneak preview of “The Ark of Return” on a private tour with Mr. Leon. Walking around the memorial, interacting with it and explaining his intentions with the design, he explains that that is also what he expects visitors to the UN to do as well.

Mr. Leon says the tactile elements are meant to encourage fuller engagement and he hopes the monument can become both a pilgrimage for the public and a totem for dignitaries at the UN, reminding them, as they deal with global issues on a daily basis, of mistakes made in the past.

Highlighting some of the features of the monument, he notes the triangular marble panels, which were inspired by the maps of the triangular trade in slaves. The maps are also reflected explicitly in the structure, with three such maps etched into the walls, so visitors are confronted by the uncomfortable truth.

“These three triangular patterns describe the slave routes from specific locations in West Africa and throughout Africa to South America, to the Caribbean and Central America, and to North America,” he says. “So this map is supposed to really help us acknowledge the impact, the tragedy, the scale of the impact of the global slave trade and how it really transformed the world.”

Other imagery that struck Mr. Leon and his team during research for the project included drawings of actual slave ships, depicting cross-sections of vessels and showing their systematic organisation in order to pack in as much “human cargo” as possible.

“We felt that that experience was very much something that needed to be visually described,” he says, referring to the human forms, stacked horizontally in three levels, barely able to sit-up. “I think they lost at lest 15 per cent or more of the ‘cargo’ on a typical slave journey.”

And one of the most important elements of the memorial is that of a deliberately androgynous human sculpture, called ‘the trinity figure,’ representing the human spirit and the spirit of the men, women and children of African descent whose deaths resulted from the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

“A lot of people had to suffer in very confined quarters,” he says. “And the reason why it kind of seems like it’s androgynous, it’s sort of meant to represent those three elements – men, women and children. You’re sort of not really supposed to be able to tell.”

The figure’s leg, hand and face are made from black Zimbabwean granite.

“It has an outreached hand that’s meant to kind of reach out to people that are coming in,” he says, going on to describe one of the key aspects of the entire memorial. “It features a kind of tear that comes out of the face. That tear is supposed to wash down the side of the face and sets up the third element in the project.”

That third element is a triangular waterfall, created by the tears that flow from the face of the ‘trinity statue’ into two triangular reflecting pools. Mr. Leon says this element, located outside of the memorial, looks ahead to the future.

“It’s really about dealing with our current conditions of contemporary slavery and how that actually is something we need to be fighting today,” he says. “It’s about acknowledging that condition and thinking about future generations and educating future generations so this tragedy doesn’t happen again in the future. So that’s why it’s pointing the way forward for us after you’ve passed through.”

Mr. Leon says this final element is a “critical component” of the memorial because of the educational component it contains. And it is that part of the project that excites him most. While acknowledging that he will be “very excited and relieved” when the memorial is revealed to the public, he says he will be most moved by seeing schoolchildren moving through the monument, learning about the history to which it speaks.
“Those are the moments that I find that are much more satisfying,” he says. “It’s going to be exciting to actually be there on the day of the unveiling but I think that it’s also the ongoing education moving forward from there that actually brings me ongoing joy as well.

**On International Day, Ban calls for release of UN personnel unlawfully arrested and detained**

25 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called today for the release of all United Nations personnel who have been unlawfully arrested and detained, in a message to mark the International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff Members.

“I call on relevant Member States to respect the status, privileges and immunities of the United Nations and to immediately release all UN staff members and associated personnel who are being unlawfully detained,” said Mr. Ban, noting intensified demand for UN engagement around the world. “In addition, I appeal to those non-State actors that are holding staff members to immediately release them.”

The International Day is held on the anniversary of the abduction of Alec Collett, who was taken by armed gunmen in 1985 while working for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). With his remains having been found and returned to his family in 2009, the Day also honours his memory, and that of all those who have suffered a similar fate.

As of 15 March 2015, 33 UN and associated personnel were detained by State authorities in 15 countries. One staff member is missing and two contractors remain in the custody of abductors. In the first two months of 2015, abductions of UN personnel occurred in Afghanistan and the Central African Republic. Two contractors working for the Joint UN-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) were kidnapped in Zalingei at gunpoint and remain in custody.

“Abductions of United Nations personnel are increasingly carried out by unscrupulous actors seeking to extract ransom, make a political point, or impede the Organization’s operations,” said Mr. Ban.

He expressed particular concern about the insecurity faced by staff in South Sudan and Syria, pointing to the abduction of a World Food Programme staff member in South Sudan last October, and the numerous UNRWA staff members detained, arrested or missing in Syria.

Those concerns were echoed in a statement released by the UN Staff Union, which said the situation in South Sudan was “particularly troublesome,” as humanitarian workers face the constant threat of kidnapping and harassment in trying to carry out their work. It noted that national staff members were particularly badly affected by detention and abduction, with nine out of 10 UN personnel detained or arrested by State authorities locally recruited.

“Every day that goes by is one too many for our abducted colleagues,” Ian Richards, Vice President of the UN Staff Management Committee, said in the statement.

The statement called for the immediate release of all unlawfully arrested and detained UN personnel, and noted that States held responsibility for obtaining the release of personnel, prosecuting the perpetrators and providing security to UN personnel.

“These are men and women who joined the United Nations to help others, but instead they must live daily in fear of their lives,” said Mr. Richards. “The thoughts and prayers of the 70,000 staff of the United Nations are with them at this time and every day.

“It is an outrage that those who abduct relief workers should continue to go unpunished,” he added. “The United Nations and its member governments must do all they can, and more than they are doing now, to secure our colleagues’ release and bring their abductors to justice.”
UN marks Day of Remembrance with calls to end modern slavery

25 March - As the international community gathers to commemorate the millions of victims exploited by slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today warned that the insidious practice of forced bondage continued to reverberate around the world in various forms – from forced labour and trafficking to sexual exploitation and captivity in slavery-like conditions.

“Tragically, slavery has still not ended. Slavery stubbornly persists in many parts of the world,” Mr. Ban declared in his annual message marking the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. “These despicable practices could not exist without deep-seated racism. It is absolutely vital that the dangers inherent in racism are made crystal clear to all.”

On March 25 every year since 2007, the UN observes the International Day to honour the more than 15 million men, women, and children who suffered and died during the more than 400-year transatlantic slave trade, the largest forced migration in history.

This year's theme, “Women and Slavery,” pays tribute to and celebrates the strength of the many enslaved women who endured unbearable hardships, including sexual exploitation, as well as those who fought for freedom from slavery and advocated for its abolition.

According to the UN, it is estimated that one third of the approximately 15 million people who were deported from Africa through the Transatlantic Slave Trade were women.

In remembering their grim legacy, Mr. Ban acknowledged that women slaves had played “a key role” in maintaining the dignity of their communities, adding that “too often their leadership and brave resistance have been underestimated or forgotten.”

The Day will be marked by a number of commemorative ceremonies held at UN Headquarters in New York, including a special General Assembly meeting, a global video conference held with students, and the Secretary-General's unveiling of the Ark of Return – a permanent memorial honouring slavery's victims which, Mr. Ban said, would “bring home to people from around the world the terrible legacy of the slave trade.”

“The Transatlantic slave trade remains a monstrous crime and a stain on human history,” the Secretary-General continued. “On this important Day of Remembrance, I call for a renewal of our commitment to end modern slavery, so our children will live in a world free of racism and prejudice with equal opportunity and rights for all.”