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Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC**

**Remarks at the commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of
Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade**

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Mr. President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, Secretary-General, delegates, and distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am so honoured and humbled to speak to the United Nations General Assembly and its honoured guests as we mark the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

I would suggest that you can tell a great deal about a people, a country by what it deems important enough to remember, what they built monuments to celebrate, what graces a country's museums or what holidays they embrace. Yet I would argue that we learn even more about a country by what it chooses to forget, what it cloaks in silence. Nowhere is this silence more deafening than when countries are confronted with the issue of slavery and the slave trade.

I am haunted by the fact that few countries set aside a day or even a moment to remember publicly the slave past or the horrors of the slave trade. We should all be haunted because not knowing and not remembering the history, legacy, and contemporary meaning of slavery hurts the living and dishonours the millions who experienced the slave trade, survived the institution of slavery or who fought for the abolition of this great evil.

That is why events like this Day of Remembrance are fitting tributes to our ancestors because it gives voice to the anonymous, make the unseen- visible, and ensures that people will remember. But is it essential that we do more than simply acknowledge history. We must embrace the contemporary resonance of slavery and find a past that is useful and meaningful to living generations. After all, it was slavery and the slave trade that made the modern world. And as a 19th century philosopher once wrote "unless we deal with the rough and smooth edges of a country's past, the experience of earlier generations weigh like a nightmare on... the living."

Remembering slavery also calls for a paradigm shift that helps redefine the public's notions about the lives of the men and women who were enslaved. Many in America are still uncomfortable and often embarrassed by their ancestors held in bondage. They remember that the enslaved were brought and sold but not that they were brave. They remember the pain of the enslaved but not their hopefulness. I once received a letter from a leading political figure who asked "can't you just make slavery go away? This Day of Remembrance ensure that the memory and meaning of slavery will never "just go away."

I hope that rather than a sense of embarrassment or discomfort, this day will help people find understanding and knowledge. Personally, I am in awe of my enslaved ancestors. I wish we all had their

strength, their resiliency, their creativity and their belief in a better future that once seemed unimaginable.

I stand in awe of the will that enabled millions to survive the slave trade. I am saddened by the millions who did not. I am moved by the courage of those who struck blows against the institution of slavery or who used their feet as the means of self-liberation. I am humbled by the actions of Toussant L'Ouverture and Harriett Tubman. But I am even more impressed by the nameless men and women who arose each day and vowed that the field would not break them or destroy their sense of family. I am amazed by those who struggled to keep their culture alive and their humanity intact.

Rather than shame, we should find strength. Rather than despair and embarrassment, we should find hope; rather than loss, we should find our humanity, and rather than forget, we should remember.

We can honour all those sons and daughters of Africa – stolen, lost or forever changed by slavery – if we removed their lives from the margins and help the places they were forced to call home – North America, South America, and the Caribbean – understand how much the tint, tone, and culture and their national identity was shaped by the slave trade. We honour the enslaved if we draw sustenance and inspiration for their sacrifices to continue to struggle for fairness and social justice globally. What better models for achievement against the odds than those enslaved men and women?

Ultimately, the International Day of Remembrance is crucial because it is a wonderful but uncompromising mirror. A mirror that reminds us of our struggles and our losses. But it is also a mirror that reminds us of great strength, noble ideals, and dreams and hopes that were realized. The Day of Remembrance is a mirror that illuminates the darker corners of our history. It is a mirror that gives visibility and voice to the millions of Africans who are lost to history. Yet this day should remind us of our commonalities, our shared culture, and our responsibilities to continue to struggle, to fight the good fight for racial and social justice. But most important, the day of Remembrance is a clarion call to remember.

And there is nothing more powerful than a people, than a nation steeped in its history. And there is nothing more noble than honouring our ancestors and their struggles by remembering.

Let me conclude with the words of a formerly enslaved man, Cornelius Holmes, who said in 1939 “though the slavery question is settled, its impact is not. The question will be with us always. It is in our politics, it is in our courts, it is in our highways, it is in our manners, in our religion and in our thoughts. All the day – everyday.

What a gift we give to the world and to our ancestors if through this day of remembrance if we can help people remember that we are shaped, informed, and touched by slavery – all the day – Everyday.

Thank you.