PERMANENT MISSION OF JAMAICA
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

STATEMENT BY

H.E. COURTENAY RATTRAY
PERMANENT PRESENTATIVE OF
JAMAICA TO THE UNITED NATIONS

ON

AGENDA ITEM 116:

FOLLOW-UP TO THE COMMEMORATION OF THE TWO-HUNDREDTH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE ABOLITION OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

SIXTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

NEW YORK, 21ST NOVEMBER 2014

Please check against delivery
Mr. President,

I have the honour to deliver this statement under agenda item 116 as the Assembly gives consideration to the draft resolution entitled Permanent Memorial to and Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This is an issue of tremendous importance to my delegation not only because we have had the privilege of leading the CARICOM and African Group initiative to erect a permanent memorial at the United Nations, but also because the historical significance of Slavery, its repercussions and ongoing manifestations, have an immeasurable impact on the present status and development prospects of my country.

Perhaps, Mr President, some may consider slavery and the slave trade as strictly an unfortunate period of history, with the emphasis placed on history. Countries like mine are, however, faced with present realities that owe much, if not all, of their origin to the crime against humanity perpetuated upon millions of our ancestors over centuries. The harm caused to our societies by the abominable crime of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism has, in some ways, become entrenched in our societal construct.

As noted historian and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies has said, “The victims of these crimes and their descendants were left in a state of social, psychological, economic and cultural deprivation and disenfranchisement that has ensured their suffering and debilitation today”. As a country, we are also confronted by disadvantages in the global economic system, many of which find their roots in the systemic inequalities arising from the system of slavery and colonialism.

These are sensitive issues, but ones we must face; they are issues we must address, whether within ourselves or between us all, if we ever hope to break the back of slavery’s legacies of racism, prejudice and discrimination.

Jamaica considers that the recently proclaimed and soon to be launched International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) provides an opportune space and time to earnestly and practically address these matters, within the comprehensive Programme of Activities geared towards the further implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. We welcome the constructive engagement of all states in this exercise.

Mr. President,

Jamaica thanks the Secretary-General for his reports under this item. I wish to use this opportunity to commend the Department of Public Information for its work in conducting the educational outreach and public awareness activities requested in our recurring resolutions, up to and including resolution 68/7. The partnerships established over the course of the past year and the expanded scope of the programme demonstrate a great degree of creativity and professionalism. We hope that moving forward, this critical aspect of our efforts to address the history and enduring effects of slavery will grow stronger and extend its reach and effectiveness. Allow me also to commend the UN Office for Partnerships for its diligent stewardship of the Permanent Memorial Trust Fund, an item on which I will shortly say a few words. I also thank UNESCO for their invaluable support and commitment to the project, and congratulate Director-General Irina Bokova and her team on the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Slave Route Project.
We are, however, disappointed that, according to the Report on the Outreach Programme, only a few Member States provided information on their efforts to deal with this issue. It is, perhaps, an indication of one of two things: either that as Member States we have not been doing enough or, we are not sufficiently publicizing the positive things we are doing. I encourage all Member States to address these matters, as appropriate.

One matter on which I can happily report is the steady progress we are making on the permanent memorial initiative. As described in the resolution before us, we have moved into the construction phase. The architect and his team are currently fabricating the Ark of Return off-site and are on track to deliver the memorial in time for its unveiling early next year. I use this opportunity to express thanks to the Department of Management and the entire team working on the CMP with whom we have collaborated to ensure the smooth interface between the Memorial and the work now being completed on the GA Podium. We look forward to continued collaboration in the remaining months as we move the Ark onto the compound and install it at the Visitors’ Plaza.

The aim is to complete and erect the Memorial in time for it to be unveiled next March 25, the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It would also be one of the first significant events of the International Decade for People of African Descent.

I use this opportunity to appeal to Member States, particularly those which have not yet done so, to make a contribution to the Trust Fund for the Memorial. The small gap that remains is not beyond our united capacity to fill. We are grateful for the generous contributions already made by Member States, civil society and private individuals. With the project at this stage, the General Assembly cannot now afford to falter. We are therefore pleased that the PGA will host a pledging luncheon on 10 December, which will be an opportune moment for Member States to pledge contributions. We urge Member States to ensure that with the imminent completion of the project, they are counted amongst those that contributed to this noble initiative.

Mr President,

In closing, let me emphasize that while we strive towards the completion of the Memorial, the real work does not end there. We should remain seized of the need to continue to address the legacies of Slavery, even as we deal with stamping out contemporary forms of Slavery. Until every player of a minority race or ethnicity can take the field of play and not be confronted by racist chants in the stands we must keep working. Until our afro-descendant minority populations can rise to the fore and be seen, heard and valued, then we must keep working. Until we succeed in rooting-out afro-pessimism and instill value in our black heritage, as a mark of distinction, there is work to be done.

As we adopt this draft resolution, let us redouble our efforts to ensure that we do not merely pay lip service and repeat empty rhetoric. Let us ensure that our actions speak loudly and clearly, “lest we forget”.

I thank you.