GOVERNMENT OF ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

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STATEMENT

By

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AMBASSADOR/PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE

PERMANENT MISSION OF ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA TO THE UNITED NATIONS

ON BEHALF OF THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY

(CARICOM)

on

Agenda Item (116): Follow-up to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: Commemorative meeting on the occasion of the INTERNATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE OF THE VICTIMS OF SLAVERY AND THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

MARCH 25th, 2015

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Mr. President,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Member States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

For our people, today is both a solemn and celebratory occasion. It is solemn because we commemorate the victims of the heinous crime against humanity embodied in chattel Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade; we recall the loss and suffering of millions of our ancestors during that dark period; we remember the injustice and inhumanity some of which linger on today. It gives us cause to reflect, ponder and meditate.

We nevertheless recognize the celebratory nature of the occasion. We celebrate the fact that through the struggles we have overcome; we celebrate the dismantling of the Slave Trade and of Slavery; we celebrate the recognition that we all as an international community must continue to work toward addressing the legacies of Slavery; we celebrate the historic unveiling earlier this afternoon of the Permanent Memorial to the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade an initiative pioneered by the CARICOM group which has finally come to fruition.

Mr. President,

The theme for this year’s commemoration is quite apt even as we mark the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Programme for Action adopted at the “Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995”. Focusing on “Women and Slavery” presents the opportunity to uncover the unique ways in which women were particularly affected by Slavery but also the significant contribution by women in the resistance movement which led to the abolition of the Slave Trade and culminated in Emancipation.

We pay due respect and recognition to the role played by women across the Caribbean region in the fight against Slavery. One can recount the heroics of the Maroon leader Nanny in Jamaica, the defiance of Zabeth in Haiti, Nanny Grigg in Barbados among many others. Millions struggled to raise and care for families on the plantations amidst their exploitation. Many were subject to sexual violence and treatment as reproductive factories, particularly after the abolition of the Slave Trade reduced the planters’ ability to acquire new slaves. In view of these purposeful actions, many women bore the sole responsibility of raising children and managing their homes. One can see the seeds of what we now recognize as the preponderance of single-mother headed households and other vestiges of gender inequality in our societies today.

Women faced a double burden during slavery, being under-valued because of their sex, even as they were dehumanized because of their race. Nevertheless, through strength and perseverance, slave women have left for us a legacy of determination, sacrifice, creativity, adaptability and resilience that characterizes Caribbean women today. Having gone through the fire, we have emerged stronger in spite of the cruelty meted out to our people.
Mr. President,

CARICOM reiterates the importance of addressing the legacies of Slavery including as it relates to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and prejudice. Having overcome Slavery, we cannot tolerate the root causes of that inhuman system to retain a foothold in our societies. People of African descent continue to face too many uphill battles in order to be treated equally, to have fair access to justice, to employment and economic opportunities, to quality education and housing, to healthcare, to movement without harassment and to achieve their dreams and goals.

In too many places, the boundaries of one’s achievement are defined by the color of one’s skin rather than the capacity of one’s competence and character. It is no coincidence that there remains a high correlation between poverty levels and race in many countries, including in those where growth and development appear to be on an upward trajectory.

This is why it is important that the Programme of Activities for the International Decade for People of African Descent should be effectively used to dismantle the inequities that persist and address the disadvantages faced by the descendants of those Slaves captured, tortured, exploited and killed, and in some cases who overcame Slavery.

We should also pursue every effort to have meaningful restitution for the wrongs that were perpetrated against the enslaved Africans and their descendants. CARICOM’s Reparatory Justice Programme seeks to create the framework within which a just and lasting reconciliation of responsibilities can be achieved. We are open and prepared to engage in a constructive and conciliatory approach to ensure that the wrongs of the past can be balanced against the rights of the present and future.

Mr. President,

I would like to, on behalf of the CARICOM group, express our profound gratitude to our partners across the various regional groups within the UN for their support of the CARICOM initiative to erect a Permanent Memorial as a lasting tribute to honour the victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We want to salute our leading partners, the African Group for their collaboration. We specially thank those delegations which worked with us through the Permanent Memorial Committee, and include there for special mention UNESCO, the Department for Public Information and the United Nations Office for Partnerships all of whose expertise and hard work has contributed immensely to the completion of the project.

We have not forgotten the diligent and committed work of those who pioneered this project from its early stages; here I must mention Ambassador Raymond Wolfe former Permanent Representative of Jamaica and Chair of the Permanent Memorial Committee whose steadfastness can be credited for moving us toward our goal; Mr. Amir Dossal who crafted the funding strategy that was critical to getting the broad support to build the Memorial.

This afternoon we unveiled the Ark of Return on the Visitor’s plaza. The Memorial designed and built by a son of the Caribbean, Rodney Leon, of whom we are immensely proud. The Permanent
Memorial will stand on these grounds and speak volumes to hundreds of thousands in the years to come.

And I could not close without expressing sincere thanks to all those who made voluntary contributions towards the construction of the Memorial. These included Member States from all regions, of all sizes, and at all stages of development; it includes civil society and private individuals who saw a need to commit to this worthwhile cause. We thank you all.

In closing, Mr. President, CARICOM reiterates that the progress we have made should not cause us to rest on any laurels. In fact, quite the opposite, we should redouble our efforts to use all means at our disposal to combat racism and to eliminate racial discrimination. The modern day manifestations of Slavery should be countered with all our might. We, who have come out victorious from the inhumanity of Slavery, should be at the vanguard of ensuring that this tragedy never again rears its ugly head.

In acknowledging the tragedy and considering the legacy, we dare not forget. Our collective action remains the most suitable honor that we can give.

I thank you.