Statement on behalf of the Western European and Other States Group on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,

25 March 2015.

Mr. President,

I have the honor to speak on behalf of the Western European and Other States Group in commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Slavery during the Transatlantic Slave Trade was a crime against humanity and among the worst violations of human rights in history. The transatlantic slave trade is an unparalleled tragedy which persisted for over four centuries; it involved the merciless kidnapping, massive abuse and cruel enslavement of millions of Africans, many of whom perished during the horrific journey across the Atlantic.

Today, we gather to pay our solemn respect to the countless victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade and to commemorate the immense suffering and injustice they endured. We also pay tribute to the fight against slavery and remember the courage of the enslaved men and women who struggled to end this oppression. It is estimated that one third of the people who were forcibly taken from their homeland in Africa through the Transatlantic Slave Trade were women. Those women who survived suffered tremendously from the hardships of forced labour, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination, rape and torture, yet their stories often remain untold.

Mr. President,

We have just witnessed here at the United Nations the unveiling ceremony of the ‘Ark of Return’, the Permanent Memorial in honour of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We thank the Chairman of the Permanent Memorial Committee, Ambassador Courtenay Rattray for his leadership in this regard. This monument not only serves as a powerful reminder of the unbearable hardship and the tragic death of the millions of men, women and children who died as a result of slavery, it also confronts us to reflect on the devastating and long lasting impact of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It reminds us that much remains to be done to combat the dangers of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance today.

Today’s observance occurs during the first year of the International Decade for People of African Descent. We begin this Decade with a full and robust commitment to ensuring the rights of persons of African descent, and to combating racism and discrimination against them.
Today's observance should also encourage us to act in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proclaims that 'No one shall be held in slavery or servitude and that slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms'.

Unfortunately, slavery is not only a tragedy of the past. Today, millions of men, women, and children all over the world are subjected to contemporary slavery-like practices such as sex trafficking, forced labour - including forced child labor, domestic servitude, and bonded labour - and early and forced marriage. Women and children, especially adolescent girls, make up the majority of victims of these dehumanizing and abhorrent practices.

It is our obligation as Member States to comply with our obligations under international human rights law and international law pertaining to trafficking in persons; we must redouble our efforts to eradicate all forms of modern slavery and to ensure justice, dignity and freedom for all.