United Nations

Commemorative Meeting of the General Assembly
For the International Day of Remembrance
Of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

25 March 2015

Statement delivered by

H.E. Mr. Thomas Mayr-Harting

Head of Delegation
Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations

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Mr. President,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union.

The Candidate Countries Turkey, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, Montenegro*, Iceland*, Serbia* and Albania*, the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the EFTA countries Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia, align themselves with this statement.

At the World Conference Against Racism in 2001, the EU joined the international community in acknowledging that: "slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims." The Conference further acknowledged that "slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade, and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences."

In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly agreed to establish a Permanent Memorial in the grounds of the United Nations to honour the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade and [today] we have witnessed the unveiling of the memorial "The Ark of Return" [by the Haitian-American architect Rodney Leon]. The memorial will remind us of the tragic legacy of the slave trade and the need to continue the fight against racism and prejudice.

We would like to acknowledge the work of the Committee of interested States and the generous voluntary contributions from Member States, complemented by funding from foundations and private individuals. A particular word of praise is due to the Chair of the Permanent Memorial Committee, Mr Courtanay Rattray, Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the United Nations, for his leadership and commitment to bring this project to a successful conclusion as well as the dedication of all members of the Permanent Memorial Committee.

* The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.
* Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.
Mr President,

No effort should be spared to raise the awareness of, educate and inform current and future generations about the causes, consequences and lessons of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. In this context we want to acknowledge the work carried out by UNESCO and the UN Department of Public Information.

Mr President,

This international day contributes to the remembrance of the millions of persons who suffered from transatlantic slave trade. This day should also help us to remember that despite its prohibition, slavery and slavery-like practices - in the form of trafficking of persons and other forms of modern slavery - persist and constitute flagrant violations of human rights. The lessons of the past should urge us to address this slave trade of our time, including by addressing roots causes such combating discrimination on any grounds. We owe it to the women, men, girls and boys who, as we speak here, are being kept against their will and exploited in appalling conditions. Every victim of modern slavery is one victim too many.

We now have legal instruments such as the Palermo Protocol aimed at the prevention of trafficking in persons, protection of its victims and prosecution of its perpetrators. Further steps need to be taken towards their full implementation.

Mr President,

The memorial and this day should be a reminder of a time where human beings were treated as commodities that were openly traded, but also the victorious fight from oppression to freedom, a quest for universal human rights, guided by the belief in human dignity and in the equality of all human beings.

Thank you.