

UN spotlights slave descendants' legacy of achievements, overcoming 'dark chapter of human history'

24 March 2017 – Stressing the importance of remembering slavery and slave trade in human history, the legacy of which “resounds down the ages,” United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today highlighted the contributions that people of African descent have made and are continuing to make to their communities and to the world.

“We must never forget this dark chapter of human history,” Mr. Guterres told a General Assembly meeting to commemorate the abolition of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, ahead of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The International Day, observed annually on 25 March, offers the opportunity to honour and remember those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system, and aims to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice today.

“We must always remember the role played by many of our countries – including my own country of Portugal – in carrying out the largest forced migration in history and in robbing so many millions of people of their dignity and often also of their lives,” Mr. Guterres said.

The legacy of slavery resounds down the ages, and the world has yet to overcome racism. While some forms of slavery may have been abolished, others have emerged to blight the world, including human trafficking and forced and bonded labour. “Heeding the lessons of yesterday means fighting these ills today,” he said.



A close-up from the memorial on the legacy of slavery. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz

This year’s commemoration comes as the UN Remember Slavery Programme, which, in addition to educating about one of history’s greatest tragedies, works to combat racism and prejudice, marks the 10th anniversary of its establishment.

The Programme’s theme for 2017 is ‘Remember Slavery: Recognizing the Legacy and Contributions of People of African Descent.’ It urges remembrance of the fact that the transatlantic slave trade, while forming a very dark chapter in human history, also led to an unprecedented transfer of knowledge and culture from Africa to the Americas, Europe and elsewhere.

The Programme also invited Lonnie G. Bunch III, Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.,

to deliver a keynote address at the Assembly's commemorative meeting today.

AUDIO: Slavery is the last great "unmentionable" that has profoundly shaped every corner of the world although it happened centuries ago, the Dr Lonnie Bunch III, Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture has said.

The descendants of slaves have made their mark as inventors, economists and jurists; as authors and scholars; as artists and athletes; as politicians and civil rights leaders.

Mae Jemison was the first African-American woman to enter outer space. Ralph Bunche, the first African-American won a Nobel Prize and was one of the most respected and celebrated international civil servants in the history of the United Nations. Derek Walcott, the poet and Nobel laureate from Saint Lucia who died one week ago, confronted the brutality of slavery and the legacy of colonialism through his poetry and writings.

"The United Nations and I personally attach the greatest importance to the challenge of slavery, past and present," Mr. Guterres said, urging all to unite against hatred at this time of rising divisiveness and build a world of freedom and dignity for all.

In order to more permanently honour the victims, a memorial has been erected at UN Headquarters in New York. The unveiling took place on 25 March 2015. The winning design for the memorial, The Ark of Return by Rodney Leon, an American architect of Haitian descent, was selected through an international competition and announced in September 2013.

Peter Thomson, the President of the General Assembly, called for the protection of human rights and an end to racism, xenophobia and modern forms of slavery, including human trafficking, forced labour and child labour.

The consequences of slavery had not ended with emancipation, but continued to this day, he emphasized. Some were negative, but others positive, he said, underscoring the contributions made by descendants of slavery to shaping multicultural societies.