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Follow-up to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade

Programme of educational outreach on the transatlantic slave trade and slavery

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 63/5, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on continued action to implement the programme of educational outreach on the transatlantic slave trade and slavery.

Since the establishment of the outreach programme, the Department of Public Information has developed activities to bridge the knowledge gap about the slave trade and its aftermath, and to encourage broad-based study and discussion on the topic. The Department continued to implement activities aimed at educating present and future generations about the causes, consequences, lessons and legacy of the 400-year transatlantic slave trade and to communicate the dangers of racism and prejudice.

For the observance of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade on 25 March, the Department organized a cultural evening and concert, entitled “Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum”, in the General Assembly Hall. Other events at United Nations Headquarters included an exhibit and a student videoconference; the screening of documentary films and discussions with producers; a briefing for non-governmental organizations on the “Legacy of the slave trade in modern society” and a “meet the author” book programme.

The Department’s outreach and awareness-raising strategy also included follow-up activities throughout the year, targeting and responding to communities and civil society organizations interested in furthering the aims of the Organization pertaining to the transatlantic slave trade and slavery.

* A/64/150.



I. Introduction

1. On 17 December 2007, the General Assembly, by its resolution 62/122, designated 25 March as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.
2. The General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to collaborate with and build upon the work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), including its Slave Route Project, to establish a programme of educational outreach.
3. The present report outlines the programme of activities undertaken in 2009 after the adoption of the follow-up resolution 63/5.

II. Background

4. The transatlantic slave trade played a major part in world history. There is still a substantial knowledge gap about the 400-year long slave trade and its lasting consequences throughout the world, including the important contributions made by slaves to the building of societies in the lands of their enslavement. This lack of knowledge and the need for further information and awareness about the history of that tragedy extends to some of the descendants of the enslaved peoples and to other populations, in particular those outside the areas directly involved in the trade in the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas.
5. A study of the lives of enslaved Africans in the Americas and the Caribbean reveals the capacity of human beings, even under dehumanizing conditions, to influence the societies in which they live. Without diminishing the brutality and horrors of what occurred, it shows some of the diverse ways in which people can confront and transcend oppression, and offers examples of survival and growth in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.
6. The 2009 commemoration was organized around the theme “Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum”. Since the dawn of humanity in Africa, drums have provided the pulse of history and continue to communicate the human spirit. Participants all over the world were encouraged to beat the drum on 25 March in order to commemorate the victory of humanity over adversity.

Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum

Traditional African societies acknowledge that the drum has a spirit that is clearly observable. It is believed that the voices of great ancestors are hidden inside the wood of trees so they can be accessed whenever men and women need them. Drums also carry a universal truth: every time you beat the drum, you break the silence.

During the Middle Passage, ship captains encouraged slaves to beat the drum in the hope that this would help them not to despair. However, upon arrival in the Americas, beating the drum was forbidden for most slaves. Slave owners were usually fearful and did not understand the influence that beating the drum had on slaves. Nevertheless, the drum continued its journey, and accompanied black slaves everywhere they went, influencing or creating new musical and artistic genres, such as the call-and-response pattern first brought to the Americas and other parts of the world through the slave trade and now prevalent in blues, jazz, rock-and-roll, and hip-hop.

But the influence of drums went beyond music. Drums galvanized the fighting spirit of black slaves during the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina or the New Orleans uprising. Everywhere in the Americas, African slaves celebrated their regained freedom by beating the drum.

III. Activities

7. “Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum”, the theme of the programme of events organized by the Department of Public Information in 2009, highlights the focus of the programme, which is to shed light on the history of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, and to stimulate discussion and dialogue about the causes, consequences and legacy of the slave trade, in order to create an understanding that would help to prevent similar acts of racism and prejudice from occurring in the future. In planning the programme of outreach activities, the Department pursued established as well as innovative methods to broaden its reach and deepen its impact. In addition to media interviews, press announcements, notes to correspondents and briefings to Member States, non-governmental organizations and youth groups, new technologies were employed to disseminate information about the slave trade.

8. As part of the annual observance of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the Secretary-General, on the eve of the commemoration, on 24 March 2009, presided over the opening of a “Drums” exhibit sponsored by the Government of Cameroon. The exhibit aimed at highlighting the cultural significance and artistic relevance of drums to peoples of African descent, including in the diaspora. A special exhibit item was the “Ndek”, a 230-year old drum weighing 400 kilograms and believed to represent the “soul” of the Gounoko people in north-west Cameroon. This drum was used to transmit advance warning signals to the Gounoko youth within a 10-mile radius, urging them

to flee approaching warriors and slave traders. Madame Pauline Andela Tsala, a 76-year-old drummer from Cameroon and one of the last practitioners of the talking drum tradition, demonstrated for the audience her ability to decipher and translate rhythms and patterns of drum beats. The exhibit also displayed drums belonging to the late Nigerian master drummer, Babatunde Olatunji. The Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture and the New York-based Caribbean Cultural Centre contributed to the exhibit.

9. The official remembrance took place on 25 March 2009 with a noon drumming event, launched by the Secretary-General, who played notes on a drum from Cameroon. He was joined by Cameroon's Minister of Culture, Ama Tutu Muna. Statements were made by the Secretary-General, a representative of the President of the General Assembly, the Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone and Chair of the African Group, Shekou Touray, and the Permanent Representative of Grenada, Ambassador Dessima Williams, in her capacity as Chair of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Caucus of Ambassadors to the United Nations. Percussionists and drummers from Brazil, the Caribbean, Europe, Côte d'Ivoire, the United States of America and local steel bands and schools performed during the ceremony.

10. On the same day, a cultural evening and concert was staged in the General Assembly Hall. Entitled "Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum", it celebrated the resilience of the human spirit and victory over adversity. Traditional drummers and musicians from the National Ensemble of Cameroon opened the event, which featured the following artistes and celebrities: Akon and Peter Buffett; mezzo-soprano Audrey Babcock; soprano Angela Brown; The Blind Boys of Alabama; Izaline Calister; Staceyann Chin; Toumani Diabaté; The Impact Theatre Group; Gilberto Gil; Whoopi Goldberg; Sarah Jones; Daisy Jopling; Salif Keita and his Band; Carl Lewis; baritone Lester Lynch; Emeline Michel; Ky-Mani Marley; Lenelle Moïse; CCH Pounder; Phylicia Rashad; Stew; Sing for Hope; tenor Noah Stewart; choreographer Gabri Christa, and ten dancers. The concert featured the premiere of "Blood into Gold", an original song written and performed by Akon and Peter Buffett for the Day. The webcast of the event has been archived at www.un.org/webcast.

11. As part of the commemorative events, a videoconference brought together high school students from Canada, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Sierra Leone and the United States. The students gave an overview of their countries' history (including dramatic presentations and music) and how it was linked to the transatlantic slave trade. A number of briefings and events were held prior to the week of 25 March 2009 to launch the programme. The Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information briefed Member States of the CARICOM Caucus of Ambassadors to the United Nations, representatives of the African Union and the Committee on Information, respectively.

12. The Department of Public Information created a special logo, a commemorative poster, and postcards to depict the theme "Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum". With the support of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, the Department produced T-shirts bearing the visual identity and theme of the commemoration, which were distributed to the public.

13. The Department of Public Information established a website in the six official languages of the United Nations to facilitate global access to the commemorative

activities. The site (www.un.org/en/slavery) provides educational resources on the transatlantic slave trade with links to the messages of the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly, events at Headquarters and around the world, and related documents.

14. A three-minute video produced in English and French invited viewers to organize events and beat the drum on 25 March in commemoration of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Featured, among others, are dances and polyphonic rhythms of the African continent and a range of music and dance styles in the Americas, where drums accompanied the enslaved people whose dance steps and sounds have remained almost intact. The video quickly became an online success on YouTube.

15. In connection with the remembrance, the United Nations Bookshop hosted a special “meet the author” event on 26 March 2009, featuring Ngugi wa Thiong’o (Kenya), author and distinguished professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, and Sylviane A. Diouf (Senegal), curator of digital collections at the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, and author of several books on slavery. Prior to the commemoration, the United Nations Bookshop set up a special display highlighting key titles on the subject of the transatlantic slave trade, including United Nations publications, scholarly studies, fiction and poetry.

16. On 24 March, a series of documentary film screenings was organized at Headquarters. Each film was followed by a question-and-answer session with the participation of the producers. The films shown were: “Scattered Africa: Faces and Voices of the African Diaspora” (United States, 2008), a documentary produced by cultural anthropologist and filmmaker Sheila S. Walker, who takes viewers across the Americas to Argentina, Uruguay and the United States, exploring the contributions of African people to American culture; “Black Atlantic: On the Orixas Route” (2001), a Brazilian documentary on the voyage of freed slaves from Brazil back to Africa, which showcases the spiritual life, traditions, music and dance of the people of Benin; and “Merritt College: Home of the Black Panthers”, a 2008 documentary narrated by United States Congresswoman Barbara Lee and presented by its producer Jeffrey Heyman, which chronicles the birth of the Black Panther Party at Merritt College in Oakland, California, United States.

17. A non-governmental organization briefing on “The legacy of slavery in modern society” was held as part of the commemorative events on 26 March. It began with the screening of the video “Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum”. The four-member panel included Professor Ngugi wa Thiong’o; Sylviane A. Diouf; Jeffrey Heyman, Executive Director, Marketing, Public Relations and Communications of the Peralta Community College District and the producer of “Merritt College: Home of the Black Panthers”; and Jean-Claude Martineau, a Haitian poet and historian. In his presentation, Professor Ngugi highlighted how the effects of the slave trade went beyond economics to the trauma it had inflicted on the African psyche, on the continent’s socio-economic fabric and on the African diaspora in the Americas. Ms. Diouf focused on the knowledge gap about slavery and the transatlantic slave trade and drew attention to the misinformation and distortions pertaining to this period in history. Mr. Heyman screened a trailer of his documentary film, outlining the formation of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s and how it influenced African-American culture. Mr. Martineau discussed the fate of the descendents of slaves and how they responded to the legacy of slavery through

the formation of new languages, music and other art forms focusing on Haiti, his country of birth.

IV. Outreach by the United Nations information centres

18. The network of United Nations information centres, services and United Nations offices contributed to the commemoration of the International Day. Activities included debates, photo exhibitions, video screenings and translation and dissemination of the Secretary-General's message for the Day. In addition, some centres participated in broadcasts at local radio and television stations to speak about the importance of the remembrance:

- On 25 March, the United Nations information centre in Antananarivo hosted a debate, a theatre performance and a sketch with the participation of more than 350 students and teachers from the United Nations Club. The centre also organized a photo exhibition illustrating modern forms of slavery.
- The United Nations information centre in Bujumbura broadcast in its weekly radio programme, co-produced with Radio Television Nationale du Burundi, segments of the cultural evening at Headquarters. The centre also arranged the publication of the Secretary-General's message on the Day in the major newspaper "*Le Renouveau du Burundi*" on 25 March 2009.
- The United Nations information centre in Canberra organized, in partnership with Amnesty International Australia, a drumming event with the participation of students from the University of Canberra's International Relations Society. Preschoolers from the university infant school also participated and merrily beat on the drums.
- The United Nations information centre in Dar es Salaam screened the video "Breaking the Silence: Beating the Drum" to mark the Day during the annual summit of the United Nations Clubs Tanzania Network. The summit was attended by club members from 13 regions of the United Republic of Tanzania, including Zanzibar. The centre's national information officer was also interviewed on national television and radio to speak about the Day and to highlight trends in modern slavery.
- The United Nations information centre in Nairobi arranged for six drummers to perform during an event to commemorate the International Day. Over 300 students from the Kenya Model United Nations, United Nations staff and the media participated.

V. Information outreach

19. As part of its outreach programme, the Department of Public Information facilitated the live webcast of events organized for the observance on the Internet. Excerpts were made available through United Nations Television's UNifeed programme to television stations worldwide. United Nations Radio produced several documentaries and news magazine stories on the commemoration. The Media Liaison and Accreditation Unit provided services to journalists who covered the commemorative events.

20. United Nations staff was kept informed through stories posted on iSeek. In addition, the Department publicized the event through the noon briefing of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, in event calendars of New York-based print media, e-mail alert services for United Nations accredited non-governmental organizations and subscribers to the United Nations News Centre. The Department's Meetings Coverage Section issued press releases in English and French on the subject, including notes to correspondents and the message of the Secretary-General.

21. Electronic alerts were also transmitted to permanent missions to the United Nations, offices and staff members and subscribing non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and individuals. Specific stories were posted on the Member State portal, deleGATE.

VI. Future activities

22. In the coming year, the Department of Public Information will continue to work with Member States and reinforce its coordination mechanisms with CARICOM and the African Union. The establishment of a steering committee will strengthen consultation between the Department and Member States on the planning of future commemorative events and programme activities. In the context of its outreach programme, the Department will assist in raising awareness of the Member State initiative for a permanent memorial at Headquarters and support the efforts of Russell Simmons, hip-hop pioneer and entrepreneur, who has been appointed by the Permanent Memorial Committee to serve as Goodwill Ambassador for the Permanent Memorial at the United Nations to the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

23. The Department will further encourage the study of the historical impact and legacy of slavery and the slave trade in educational settings at all levels, especially in regions that were impacted by the transatlantic slave trade. In addition, it will proceed with its discussions with UNESCO about ways in which it can assist in the distribution of educational materials on this issue created by UNESCO for schools and academic institutions around the world. The United Nations information centre in Mexico will continue to work with UNESCO on the adaptation and Spanish subtitling of the UNESCO documentary "The Slave Route: A Global Vision" for further dissemination and outreach initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean.

24. Exploring the benefits of new technologies and latest communications tools, the Department will work to make effective use of the video recording of the cultural event and concert staged at the General Assembly Hall on 25 March 2009, to further raise awareness of the significance and impact of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

25. The Department will continue to seek and build relationships with partners and to widen the range of activities offered under the programme as options for sponsorships and co-sponsorships arise. It will work to integrate the history of and the lessons learned from the transatlantic slave trade into its many activities, including as part of its activities to enhance the visibility of the message of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, which are intended to build and expand communities of understanding and to promote the unlearning of intolerance. It will continue to devise innovative means and methods by which this mandate can be realized and to mobilize activities that reinforce and strengthen the momentum and the level of public awareness generated thus far.