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Organización
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the International Day
for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition**

23 August 2007

Since 1998, UNESCO has been reminding the international community of the importance of commemorating 23 August, International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition. This date not only commemorates the historic night in 1791 when the slaves of Santo Domingo rose up to break their chains and launch the insurrection that eventually led to the Haitian revolution, it also serves to pay tribute to all those who worked collectively and individually to trigger the irreversible process of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery throughout the world. This commitment and the strategies of action used that were conducted to fight the inhumane system of slavery were to have a considerable impact on the human rights movement.

Beyond the act of commemoration, this international Day aims at eliciting reflection on a tragic past that may be distant but whose repercussions continue to fuel injustice and exclusion today. This reflection on the barbarity our society is capable of unleashing with a clear conscience is all the more necessary, salutary even, as millions of men, women and children still today suffer the horrors of new forms of slavery. This is how the remembrance of past tragedies serves to enlighten us about present-day tragedies of exploitation and dehumanization.

Reconciling the demands of the historical truth and the duty of keeping the past alive, while stimulating the debate on the problems of dealing with painful memories, intercultural dialogue and democratic citizenship in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies is, ultimately, the objective of proclaiming this day of remembrance.

This year, the celebration of International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition takes on a particular significance, because 2007 marks the bicentenary of the bill passed in the United Kingdom's Parliament that, in 1807 abolished the slave trade in the British colonies. Throughout this year, the United Kingdom and a number of Commonwealth countries are engaging in initiatives and activities to ensure greater awareness of the impact of the slave trade in the way the world has changed. These events include, among others, the commemoration ceremony on 25 March 2007 at the United Nations General Assembly, the inauguration of a slavery memorial day by the Mayor of London, the opening of a National Museum and Centre for the Understanding of Transatlantic Slavery in Liverpool and the launching of the "Joseph Project" in Ghana.

New scientific discoveries in new fields, virtually uncharted to date, have also relaunched the Slave Route Project.

The actions within the framework of this bicentenary are as varied as the routes of the slave trade and the circumstances of slavery.

UNESCO is pleased to have contributed to this movement favouring the recognition and commemoration of the history of the slave trade and slavery throughout the world. There is a greater awareness even in countries and regions of the world that did not feel concerned or were reluctant to re-open dark chapters in their history. The growing and more effective mobilization within the educational and scientific fields, of artists and performers, youth associations and non-governmental organizations amply justifies our commitment and our decision over 13 years ago to create the Slave Route Project.

Its clear definition of the ethical and political stakes involved in the issue, its emphasis on a multidisciplinary scientific approach and its prioritizing a holistic view of this tragedy, meant that the Slave Route Project had a significant impact both internationally and locally.

We must all nevertheless step up our efforts to ensure that the history of the slave trade and of slavery takes its rightful place in civic education programmes, school textbooks and audiovisual productions.

Koïchiro Matsuura