



**Adapted from webcast of extempore remarks:** Remarks by Mr. Nirupam Sen, Permanent Representative, on Agenda Item on commemoration of the Two-Hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade at the 61<sup>st</sup> session of the UN General Assembly on November 28, 2006

Madame President,

My delegation has the honour to participate in the general discussion on the agenda item titled "Commemoration of the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade". We thank the States Members of the Caribbean Community for having this agenda item included in the current session of the UNGA. Some of them have requested me to speak and I am privileged by their friendship.

I would like to comment on the significance of some of the main elements of the Resolution and on the significance of the Resolution itself. I shall mainly concentrate on the Caribbean for the sake of brevity and clarity. The Resolution speaks of the knowledge gap that exists which needs to be filled. The distinguished Permanent Representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines correctly referred to the importance of slave narratives. The historians of many developed and even developing countries write the history of States and Governments which is a usurpation of the history of the people. We hope that the UNESCO Slave Route Project Committee would also rely on slave narratives because the knowledge gap cannot be bridged without subaltern history which is the recovery of real history.

The Resolution speaks of the horrors of the Middle Passage and the revolt and resistance to enslavement. Thirty five to fifty percent of African captives died during the Middle Passage. For several centuries, there is a continuous trail of revolt from the slave ships to the Caribbean and North and South America. The first major revolt was in Jamaica in the middle of the seventeen century. Even the landscape in the Caribbean is a mute witness to this historic tragedy – the sugarcane brought by Columbus (discovery ended in conquest and robbery); the bread fruit trees brought by the infamous Captain Bligh; the star apple trees in Jamaica for provisioning slaves. Some of the accounts of the oppressors also

inadvertently tell the real story. Stedman was sent to Suriname to help suppress the rebellion of 1773 and therefore his Narrative cannot be called propaganda. The Narrative describes widespread torture in a country that was one huge concentration camp. No wonder revolts were as frequent and as great in their intensity as hurricanes. Many succeeded and set up self governing pockets organizing life on the African tribal pattern. The distinguished Representative of Bahamas has described some of the cultural patterns that still exist. The American war of independence in 1776 did not immediately destroy slavery and in this sense society did not immediately change. The revolt in San Domingo or Haiti destroyed the colonial slave structure. The distinguished Permanent Representative of Haiti spoke of Toussaint L'Ouverture. It shows the tremendous knowledge gap that so many people know about the revolt of Spartacus in Rome but so few about the great revolt led by Toussaint. France lost San Domingo in 1803 paving the way for the first black republic in the Caribbean, a colonial war that it lost a century and a half before Dien Bien Phu in Viet Nam in 1954. The Resolution speaks of the recovery of dignity: this comes partly from historical memory, from the pride of remembering these events, of reclaiming history.

The colonial powers from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries waged simultaneously three wars: a war of pillage, plunder and piracy; a war of extermination of the indigenous people and expropriation of their land and a war in Africa to transport captives into slave labour. This was the foundation of the colonial system. In many revolts in the Caribbean the indigenous people and the African blacks fought side by side and hence the deportation of Maya Indians to Cuba in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the context of recent events in the UN, we want to point out that we should not be forced to choose between the indigenous people and the Africans: only through rebuilding solidarity between the two can we move forward and be true to this history. The wealth generated from this exploitation stimulated European economy, science and technology and even culture – all are affected by their origin. I see the distinguished Permanent Representative of the UK. We have had films based on Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" and other novels. These are undoubtedly great literary productions. However, there is a silence on a crucial thing. In all the novels, there is only one sentence ( I think in Mansfield Park) where the owner of a great house is stated to own a large plantation in the West Indies. All this idyllic world was based on this. This is not to say that no intellectual had integrity. Dr. Johnson, a Tory who was far from radicalism, spoke of "the enormous wickedness of making war on nations because they cannot resist; of invading countries because they are fruitful; of extending navigation to propagate vice; of visiting distant lands to lay them waste." All the elements of the colonial system were interlinked. Indentured labour was taken from India. Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the leaders of our freedom struggle and India's first Prime Minister, speaking at the Asian-African Conference at Bandung in 1955

noted that “there is nothing more terrible, there is nothing more horrible than the infinite tragedy of Africa in the past few hundred years. When I think of it, everything else pales into insignificance, all that we have had in Asia”. The only way to redress the imbalance because of this origin of capital is to work for an equitable international economy and polity underpinned by fair and equitable rules which means a real and through going reform of international economic institutions and of the United Nations.

The resolution speaks of profound social and economic inequality and the need for effective remedies. In spite of mineral wealth – bauxite, iron, nickel, copper and chrome – and containing 10% of world’s hydrocarbons (the Caribbean is estimated to be a sea of oil and gas), the corporations of the developed world have majority ownership and get a lion’s share of the profits. The decline of sugar production and the inadequate success of the Nobel Prize winning economist W. Arthur Lewis’s model of industrialization based on bauxite or oil meant that economic bottlenecks could not be overcome; the IMF intervention also failed; unemployment and emigration make things worse. GDP statistics mask the structures of dependence. Effective remedies therefore must be based on overcoming these and creating the right international enabling environment through a genuine reform of the Bretton Woods Institutions and the United Nations. The Caribbean mind has always been free – as shown by its great writers like Aime Cesaire, Derek Walcott and George Lamming. W. Arthur Lewis spoke of protest leaders and creative leaders. The Caribbean with a large middle class and abundant talent will find both types of leaders to lead the transformation.

We are proud to co-sponsor this Resolution and support the designation of 26<sup>th</sup> March 2007 as the International Day for the Commemoration of the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, this horrendous crime against humanity and human rights. The significance of the Resolution is to help create an integrated society in the Caribbean at peace with itself; to help it take full control of its destiny; to have a fair return on its natural resources; to stop the haemorrhage of its best and brightest; only then would the revolution that began in 1791 in San Domingo be completed.

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