

**Address by
H.E. Courtenay Rattray
Ambassador/Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the United Nations
on the Occasion of the Celebration of Caribbean Heritage Month
by District Council 37
New York, 4 June 2014**

Madam Chair
Other Executives of the DC37 Caribbean Heritage Committee
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me first of all thank Madam Chairperson Carmen Charles for extending this kind invitation for me to celebrate Caribbean Heritage Month with you this evening. I am particularly pleased not just because of the strong influence of Caribbean nationals amongst your membership but also because Jamaica has long been a champion of labour and of promoting worker's rights. Some of you would be aware that our independence movement was firmly built on the foundation of an increasingly organized and militant labour movement beginning in the 1930s, although some may say one could go back to our National Hero Paul Bogle in the 1860s.

Furthermore, in the 1970s, Jamaica adopted some very progressive legislation and policies with regard to labour relations some of which at the time raised eye brows and even blood pressures but are considered as standard today: benefits maternity leave, sick leave with pay, minimum wages, and industrial disputes resolution mechanisms and so on. We in Jamaica salute our workers as the builders of our country and our trade unions as the forerunners of our

current political parties. Likewise this evening, I salute the workers of New York city. What you are doing in your daily jobs here in New York City has contributed to the building of this great city – one where everyone – including myself as a temporary resident – can live peacefully pursue their life goals and purposes.

This city of New York epitomizes the melting pot that characterizes much of this nation. This is an important factor that I very much appreciate, coming from a country like Jamaica where our motto is *Out of Many, One People*. The notion that no matter where we come from, we have enough shared humanity between us to spur us to live in harmony and to work together to build a better city and country is one that I wish were more prevalent throughout our world. This should not just be a Caribbean mentality, or indeed a New York one, but should reflect a universal value code based on tolerance and respect for each others differences.

That said, however, we all recognize that there are legacies that continue to haunt our world: such as inequality; prejudice; racism and entrenched and systemic discrimination. These are sensitive issues which many of us confront as we go through life. We recognize that the vestiges of the Transatlantic slave trade have not been removed and the relationships between the divided classes and races have yet to be reconciled. In some spheres, the entire history of enslavement is treated like a taboo subject to be swept under the carpet or airbrushed via romantic Hollywood epics.

The lingering effects of slavery can also be perceived in the present day imbalance between the developed countries of the North and the underdeveloped South. Former colonies in the Caribbean find themselves at a distinct disadvantage in economics, in trade, infrastructure and in almost every other area of comparative development. Some posit the view that a similar disconnect exists between the former slave states in the Southern USA and residents of the more affluent North. In fact, it is true to say that this divide exists within states, within cities, and even within communities.

It would almost appear that the world would want to close its eyes and just forget the past. "Move on," they say, "just move on."

Jamaica has said "No!" We cannot and should not just move on. While we ought not to remain imprisoned by our past, there has to be some acknowledgement of our history in order to properly and confidently move into the future. It is for this reason that Jamaica, alongside our Caribbean and African allies, has championed an initiative at the UN to erect a permanent memorial at a prominent place on the grounds of that global space to recognize and pay tribute to the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. The memorial is designed to be a sacred space, that will allow visitors to the site to pause for reflection, to be moved by inflection, to be inspired by

conviction and to come away with a determination to forever eradicate the practice of enslavement from all human interaction.

In September 2013, we selected and unveiled the work entitled “The Ark of Return” as the winner of the international design competition for the Permanent Memorial. The selection was the culmination of a two year process that represented three hundred and ten entries submitted by artist and designers from eighty-three countries. It may please you to know that the winning artist, Mr. Rodney Leon, is an African-American – a New Yorker – and of Haitian heritage. I would like to think that his Caribbean heritage gave him the edge in winning the competition.

The question is raised from time to time as to why we feel the need to remind the world about this tragic past when there is a need to look to the future. As the great Jamaican singer Bob Marley said: **“in this great future, we can’t forget the past.”** We cannot forget the ills of our past because they shape our current realities and will impact on our future. We cannot forget the legacies of racism, discrimination, bigotry and hatred that continue to manifest themselves in many parts of the world today.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the system of Slavery it spawned are among the most pivotal events in human history that have shaped the world as we know it today. It was one of the gravest crimes against humanity but one that has not yet been given collective acknowledgement and afforded the

opportunity for complete redemption. While we recognize that other great tragedies of history were also horrendous, we make a special case for slavery: as our forebears were brought here in chains; their children sold; their women bred like cattle for commercial purposes; their men broken by extreme levels of dehumanization; their families torn asunder and the history, traditions and culture of their race collectively debased. It is to remind ourselves of these injustices why we have mounted efforts to ensure that a lasting symbol in tribute to our forefathers be erected on the grounds of the UN. As stated in the theme for the permanent memorial, we are: “acknowledging the tragedy, considering the legacy, lest we forget...”

Ladies and gentlemen,

In closing, let me inform you that the UN’s Permanent Memorial Committee, which I have the honour to Chair, and which comprises a wide cross-section of UN Member States, UN agencies and civil society, is making every effort to raise the resources needed to bring the project to completion. We are near our goal and have already commenced the construction phase of the project. All being well, I hope that next year for your Caribbean Heritage Celebrations the memorial will have been completed and open to visitors. I encourage you to visit our website (unslaverymemorial.org) or find us on Facebook to see how you can get involved with spreading the word and helping us to bring this noble effort to a successful conclusion.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish for you a successful month of celebrations. As we celebrate our Caribbean heritage, let us ensure that we inject the unity and humanity that raises us above our fractured past, and guides us towards a fulfilling future.