

26 March 2007

**Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,
President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly,
at the Commemoration to Celebrate 200 Years of the Abolition of the
Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade**

Prime Minister,
Deputy Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

The transatlantic slave trade stands as one of the most inhuman enterprises in history. It began in the 15th century when European kingdoms were able to expand overseas and reach Africa.

It is a deplorable fact of history that the slave trade was driven by colonial expansion, emerging capitalist economies and the insatiable demand for commodities; with racism and discrimination serving to legitimate the trade.

Powerful businessmen, diplomats, church leaders, senior politicians, lawyers and merchants were among those who owned plantation slaves in the 18th century before the trade was outlawed.

Fortunes were made and financial institutions flourished on the back of human bondage. Capital gained from investments in slavery financed investments related products such as tobacco and sugar, or in art, property and land.

The wealthy became influential from their investments and slavery became an accepted part of the political economy of the time.

Demand for African labour grew as the colonies grew. The forced removal of millions of people due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade had a major affect on Africa.

Africa was impoverished while it contributed to the capitalist development and wealth of Europe and other parts of the world.

Africans traders such as Antera Duke and powerful tribal leaders also enslaved Africans and sold them to merchants.

Some African rulers resisted the devastation, such as:

King Alfonso of Kongo in the 16th century;
Queen Njingha Mbandi of Ndongo in the 17th century; and,

in the 18th century King Agaja Trudo of Dahomey.

The 25th March 2007, marks 200 years - to the day - that a Parliamentary Bill was passed to abolish the slave trade in the then British Empire.

This event marked the beginning of the end for the transatlantic traffic in human beings.

However, it was not until 1833 that the act emancipating British slaves was finally passed.

It is hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time.

The bicentenary offers us all a chance to say how profoundly disgraceful the slave trade was, and to remember the millions who suffered. It also gives us the opportunity to pay tribute to the courage and moral conviction of all those who campaigned for abolition.

These people included slaves and former slaves like Olaudah Equiano, church leaders, statesmen like William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp and countless ordinary citizens who lobbied for change.

Later in France Victor Schoelcher campaigned relentlessly, which contributed to the French decree abolishing slavery on April 27, 1848.

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

While reflecting on the past, we also need to acknowledge the unspeakable cruelty that persists today.

Slavery comes in many guises around the world - such as bonded labour, the forced recruitment of child soldiers, human trafficking and the illegal sex trade.

The first article of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights reminds us that;

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Today's commemoration, marking the bicentenary of the act abolishing the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves, must also encourage us all to live up to the Universal Declaration, and to redouble our efforts to stop human trafficking and all forms of modern slavery.

Thank you very much.