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Mémoire et Droits Humains

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Opening Speech

For nearly four hundred years of proslavery and later of colonization, human dignity was continually derided in the former empires of the conquering nations.

For many centuries, mankind was in bondage under various sundry feudal regimes. It was a given that the superiority of whites and of the rich, and the inferiority of blacks and the poor were held up and justified as the normal order of things.

Many countries, formerly colonizers, continue today to maintain unofficially a state of economic and political domination that keeps the third world, and more specifically Africa, in its position as a pool of labour and raw materials. As such, for all eternity, certain countries were privileged from birth, while others were doomed to servitude and poverty.

We have a responsibility, that of passing on and of restoring the history of the past serenely, without hate or passion, but above all with rigor. The first necessary step in this direction is an unconditional acknowledgement of the fact that proslavery, colonization, and racism are practices that must be unequivocally condemned.

Developed countries must recognize the fact that their societies are also characterized by an old heritage of racism, dating back several centuries. Their citizens presently ask that the past that shaped their societies be recognized. Public opinion demands explanations, indeed give a full accounting of that long-obscured past, characterized by enslavement and dehumanization.

It is however true that for some time now, the debate over memory and over the dark episodes of European history has been given new impulse. Voices have been raised against slave trade virtually all over the world.

The Durban Conference against racism raised public awareness of this tragic page of history: the European slave trade.

It ultimately took 150 years for France to make that new step in 2001 by voting the Taubira Law which condemns slavery and slave trade as crimes against humanity. And in 2006, it declared May 10th a national day of commemoration of the abolition of slavery.

How many more centuries must we still wait for Europe and America to finally recognize slave trade as a "Crime against humanity"?

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, the time has come for reparation.

It is time that the European Parliament and the full membership of the United Nations adopt a resolution designating slavery and slave trade as crimes against humanity, and institute an international day of commemoration of the abolition of slave trade and of slavery. In full expectation that one day the same will apply to all forms of domination and exploitation on a global scale.

However, we still think that some refuse to acknowledge the full measure of this historical reality. One thing is certain: that is the impact of proslavery on the construction of national identity was never thoroughly analyzed.

The past weighs heavily on all of modern society. Racism and new forms of subservience reappear under new guises, all of them as pernicious as unacceptable.

The greatness of a country is to acknowledge its history, with its glorious pages, but also with its darker sides.

It is through this continuum that the work of history can take form, and from there craft a shared memory. Our present responsibility is to not deny a definitive historical fact established and recognized as a crime against humanity. To refuse this recognition, is in some ways to condone this tragic episode of history.

The organization of our conference does not aim for a passionate commemoration, marked by regrets and anger, nor does it accuse or excuse, but it does aim to work on collective memory, foster an objective and demystifying reflection on a painful past, and thereby free us from its burden.

Because a past that is not fully examined spreads frustration and injury among our present generations. What is long kept under wraps comes out as the daily evils known to our society, namely violence, racism, inequality, intolerance.

In order for our youth to build citizenship based on clear references, the history of slave trade, of slavery, and of colonization must no longer be obscured.

This work is more than ever essential if we are to avoid misunderstandings and the looming clash of civilizations.

The slave trade contributed to making Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe what they are today. We can all appreciate to what extent current socio-economic realities continue to be determined by a past of slavery, of colonization, and of racism.

I am convinced that we are all assembled here by conviction that it is possible to break this barrier of prejudice and to construct a shared memory, to show that the silence kept by the proponents of discrimination has not lulled us into slumber. And we'll see to it that this law of silence is abolished.