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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 2008

Freedom from slavery and servitude is a fundamental human right recognized in Article 4 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary we celebrate this year. On this tenth International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, let us therefore remember the millions of men, women and children who were subjected to this most invidious denial of human rights, and those who fought tirelessly to end that tyranny.

This year's International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition also coincides with another important commemoration: the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade by the United States of America in 1808. Although this historic piece of legislation and similar abolition acts proclaimed in the early nineteenth century did not end the institution of slavery, they greatly contributed to dismantling the most long-lasting and widespread system of domination and oppression in human history.

Unfortunately, such bold attempts to affirm fundamental human rights for all peoples were followed by a silence that prevented post-slavery generations from understanding not only the unconscionable suffering of millions of victims but also the profound global economic, social and cultural transformations provoked by the slave trade. Indeed, it was only in 2001 that the international community formally recognized this unprecedented tragedy as a crime against humanity, through the Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa.

Since 1994, UNESCO's Slave Route Project has sought to address both the racial prejudices that attempt to justify slavery and the socio-cultural forces that have conspired to conceal its scale and impact. Through this ambitious project, UNESCO is playing a critical role in creating greater understanding of the slave trade and its consequences for modern societies, in order to contribute to the establishment of a culture of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and respect for human rights at the heart of the Organization's mandate. In all of UNESCO's fields of competence – education, the natural and human sciences, culture and communication – this is the guiding principle.

The Slave Route Project also aims to increase awareness of the African presence around the world and the still-overlooked contribution of the African Diaspora to the building of new worlds. It takes full advantage of contemporary technologies to widely disseminate the results of the considerable research carried out on slavery-related issues worldwide, including the production of an Atlas of the Interaction of African Presence and its Heritage, a multi-layered mapping tool that will take into account the intangible traditions generated over the centuries and manifested in diverse cultural activities such as music, dance, crafts, and festivities that abound in Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas. This atlas will also serve to highlight the creative diversity of our multi-layered, multi-cultural, interactive societies, which UNESCO seeks to protect and promote through legal instruments such as the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

In light of the tremendous momentum created by the celebrations of the International Year to Commemorate the Fight against Slavery and its Abolition in 2004, it is my wish that this year's International Day will offer ever more opportunities to pursue research, reinforce networking among stakeholders and involve increasing numbers of people and institutions in the remembrance of the slave trade.

While we should never forget the atrocities committed in the past, we should be equally vigilant in seeking to abolish the contemporary forms of slavery that affect millions of men, women and children around the world. Despite the arsenal of international instruments created to combat the exploitation of human beings, as well as the growing awareness of the forced labour and the sale and prostitution of

children, the disturbing truth is that such flagrant violations of human rights continue. They are a scourge undermining the social fabric of many societies, which UNESCO is working with determination to end.

I therefore call upon all UNESCO Member States to seize the opportunity provided by this International Day to make a common appeal for universal remembrance of the tragic events of the past and to renew their efforts to end all forms of oppression in order to build more tolerant and just societies for the present and future generations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Matsuura', with a stylized flourish above the name.

Koïchiro Matsuura