



## **Speech by M. Jacques CHIRAC, President of the Republic, marking the first commemorative day in metropolitan France for remembering slavery and its abolition**

Paris, 10 May 2006

Here, in the Senate, on 10 May 2001, unanimously, the nation's representatives solemnly made the slave trade and slavery a crime against humanity. France paved the way for other nations: those millions and millions of anonymous victims of slavery must be remembered and given justice.

Today, 10 May 2006, France is celebrating the first day devoted in metropolitan France to the memory of the slave trade, slavery and their abolition.

The Western slave trade, from the beginning of the sixteenth until the mid-nineteenth century, was neither the first, nor the only example of the slave trade, which went on for over a thousand years. And it required, admittedly, the connivance of many, even in the countries the slaves came from.

But because of its systematic nature, because geographically it was so widespread, the Western slave trade exerted an influence over developments throughout our whole world. The triangular trade dehumanized people over several centuries, and in several continents. A tragedy, which saw the mass deportation of men, women and children, torn from their land and families, and transported like animals.

By reducing the slaves to the level of "personal property", the Black Code, promulgated in France in 1685, denied them the quality of human beings. Biblical legend was itself distorted to legitimize this heinous trade: some claimed that the Blacks descended from Ham, cursed by his father Noah. That is how they tried to justify the unspeakable and unjustifiable.

Let's make no mistake here: today still, this tragedy finds echoes. Particularly in the West, it has been used to construct the most intolerable racist theories, totally alien to the ideas of the Enlightenment. By depriving Africa of strong blood, it exhausted that continent. And today still, forms of slavery and forced labour persist in the world, and we must mobilize against them more than ever before.

Nevertheless, from this tragedy new peoples have been born, as has a strong, original culture: we have just seen two powerful examples of it, with the Forœt des Mânes, this artistic representation of a journey through the memory of the



## PRESIDENCE DE LA REPUBLIQUE

ancestors by Lœa de Saint-Julien, whom I congratulate again on his superb creation.

And with Jacques Martial's rendering of the work of the hugely talented poet, Aim  C saire. In the excerpt from the Cahier d'un retour au Pays natal ["Return to my native land"] you will have noticed that the word "slavery" was never spoken. And its absence makes the poem even more powerful. The fact that it isn't said increases its reality. What a tribute to the nobility of the men and women from whom everything was taken away, except what was essential: their humanity.

This first day of remembrance of slavery and its abolition is a very important milestone for our country. Especially important since Overseas France has always been part of the Republic and contributes to the very nature of our French identity.

I wanted all the public authorities to mobilize for this commemoration to signal the whole nation's participation in this solemn stirring of conscience imbued with fraternity.

Today, there will be a large number of public events. Homage will be paid to the great fighters against slavery buried in Le Panth on: Toussaint Louverture, Commander Delgr s and Victor Schoelcher. In schools, teachers will organize a moment of reflection and remembrance in their classes. The public radio and television channels will put on special programmes. All the pr fets [high-ranking officials representing the State] will organize in their departments ceremonies for the remembrance of slavery. And the French government is represented in Senegal's Gor e Island, one of the places from which the slave trade slaves sailed, Gor e which saw so much suffering and so much heartbreak.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let us face up to our past, it is one of the keys to our national cohesion. It is an additional source of strength for our future since it is the mark of our ability to move forward together. We must look at this past uncompromisingly, but also without blushing. Since the Republic was born with the fight against slavery. 1794 and 1848 saw the Republic abolish slavery [the First Republic abolished it in 1794, then it was restored by the Consulate in 1802 before being definitively abolished by the Second Republic in 1848].

We are these republicans' heirs. We can be proud of their battle for human rights. Today still, their commitment places an obligation on us. This first commemoration is not an end: it is a beginning. It is the necessary affirmation of a memory of slavery shared by all the French.

Regardless of our origin, we are all united by what we all share: a love of France, our pride in living here, a feeling of national community and respect



## PRESIDENCE DE LA REPUBLIQUE

for the Republic's laws.

Today the Republic goes on, more than ever before, fighting for equality, unity, fraternity and freedom, both inside and outside our borders. For the Republic to thrive, we must fight unrelentingly against everything capable of poisoning it. Discrimination makes its victims lose their republican faith. Discrimination, racism, is the negation of everything we are, of everything we have built, of everything which makes us thrive as a nation.

To defeat the prejudices, we must fight ignorance, the act of forgetting. For this too we need this day of remembrance of slavery.

For this event to be a permanent fixture, there must now be a place of remembrance, for work, for discussion. A centre for research, cultural exchange and fraternity. This is the mission I have entrusted to Professor Edouard Glissant, tasked with doing the groundwork for the future national centre devoted to the slave trade, slavery and their abolition.

We must also have a symbolic place for this remembrance, with its central focus a major work of art. Here, in the Jardin du Luxembourg, where the Senate took its decision on 10 May 2001, there will be an original work of art commemorating the slave trade, slavery and their abolition. I am asking the Culture Minister to organize a public competition for this as soon as possible.

Ladies and gentlemen,

France is synonymous with imperatives. The imperative of remembrance, the imperatives of justice and fraternity. It is because she has always promoted this message that she occupies a unique place in the world. Faced with the infamy of slavery, France took the requisite action, was the first to do so. She will continue waging this battle, lest we forget and so that we fight all the modern forms of slavery. It is her vocation and the mark of her greatness.

And going beyond this battle, through the memory of slavery and its abolition, today we are also celebrating French diversity. A diversity, promoter of unity. A diversity from which we draw our strength and in which we must take pride.

Thank you.

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