THE 2001 UNESCO CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION OF UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE

WHY?
Submerged heritage has been less protected than cultural property on land due to the fact that the latter has been the object of research for a longer period. As underwater cultural heritage has only recently become accessible, since the 1940s in fact, comprehensive legal instruments for cooperation among states were missing. The 2001 Convention fills this gap.

HOW?
By means of a convention, adopted by an international body (i.e. UNESCO). It applies to the countries that ratify it, this means that they sign the convention and implement it in their legislation.

WHAT?
The 2001 Convention sets out basic principles for the protection of underwater cultural heritage. These basic principles include: the obligation to preserve underwater cultural heritage, the in situ preservation as a first option and finally that no commercial exploitation can be allowed. It also provides a State cooperation system for submerged heritage and widely recognised practical rules for the discipline of underwater archaeology.

WHO?
The convention was ratified by 47 States, including Cambodia.
The First World War began on 28 July 1914 and ended on 11 November 1918. Over 70 million soldiers took part in the conflict, which became one of the most extensive wars in history. Eventually, 70 nations were involved, turning it into a truly worldwide conflict.

A major element of the First World War was naval combat between prestigious fleets. The battles between German U-Boats and Allied submarines also represented a step away from traditional surface-level naval warfare towards modern submarine war. Thousands of ships sank in these battles and millions of people lost their lives. Many starved to death as a result of the sea blockades. The remnants of these battles can be found in abundance on the sea bed.

The colonies and protectorates, including Cambodia, participated largely in First World War by sending troops, labour and supplies to the European imperial powers.

Despite the huge naval participation in the First World War, the maritime component of the First World War archaeological heritage is at risk of being forgotten. As they are left unprotected, many of its vestiges are threatened. This is mainly the result of the low level of public awareness of this heritage, as a result of its location at the bottom of the ocean. Furthermore, due to ignorance, and sometimes in the pursuit of profit, this heritage is often treated carelessly. Shipwrecks are scrapped and destroyed without registration, research or consultation with the concerned Flag State. Low-irradiation metals and supposed valuable cargoes attract treasure hunters who, in the process of obtaining the material, destroy not only archaeological contexts, but also war graves.

Underwater archaeologists must be the first to visit submerged historical sites in order to evaluate them and to ensure their proper study and preservation.