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**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the opening of the third session
of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding
of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Istanbul, Turkey, 4 November 2008

Mr Minister of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey,
Mr Chairperson of the Committee,
Mr President of the General Assembly of States Parties to the Convention,
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board of UNESCO,
Distinguished Members of the Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great emotion that I join you this morning to open the third session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Allow me first of all to express my gratitude to the Turkish authorities for hosting this meeting in the fascinating ancient city of Istanbul. The Turkish Government and the Minister of Culture, Mr Ertuğrul Günay, have spared no efforts to make this session as memorable and successful as possible, and their gracious hospitality is much appreciated.

I take this opportunity to congratulate you, Minister, on Istanbul's designation as one of the three European Capitals of Culture for 2010.

Let me also extend my warmest greetings to the President of the Committee, and Vice President of the Turkish National Commission for UNESCO, Mr Osman Faruk Loğoğlu. You have been a steadfast supporter of the governing bodies of this

Convention since its creation, notably as Rapporteur of the First Session of the General Assembly of States Parties, and of its first extraordinary session. I am confident that you will discharge your duties as President of this Committee with great diligence and wisdom.

Turkey's attachment to heritage is both deep and long-standing. As a land rich in cultural heritage, the Government of Turkey has given special attention to caring for its tangible and intangible treasures. In addition to its nine World Heritage sites, including historic Istanbul, Turkey boasts two Masterpieces of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity – the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony, and the Arts of the Meddah, Public Storytellers, proclaimed in 2003 and 2005 respectively.

I would like to remind you all that Istanbul played an important role in the creation of our Convention. The "Istanbul Declaration" proclaimed in September 2002 by 74 ministers who convened in this city for the third UNESCO Round Table of Ministers of Culture to discuss the theme "intangible cultural heritage: the mirror of cultural diversity", marked a pivotal step in its genesis. At that conference, participating Ministers expressed their political will to: [I quote]

“...in a spirit of constructive cooperation, undertake to participate in the forthcoming debate of the Intergovernmental Experts Meeting in order to start elaboration of the preliminary draft of such a Convention.” (End of quote.)

With this endorsement, our work to create the Convention began.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have by my side President of the Second General Assembly, Mr Chérif Khaznadar, whose unfailing loyalty and support during the elaboration and early years of the Convention has been much appreciated by UNESCO, and by me personally. Under his skilful leadership, the General Assembly was able to adopt the first Operational Directives for the implementation of the Convention, and thus equip itself to start the next phase of its life, as we will see in a few minutes.

I am also delighted to greet Mr Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yaï, President of the UNESCO Executive Board, whose commitment to the values of the Convention has been an important source of strength to all of us.

Finally but by no means least, I should like to express my sincere thanks to all Committee members present at this session, representatives of States Parties and non States Parties to the Convention as well as all NGOs present today for their steadfast support for our work.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On becoming Director-General of UNESCO in 1999, I made it a priority to revitalize the Organization's work in the field of living heritage, and to alert the international community to the significance of safeguarding it. The adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage on 17 October 2003 by the 32nd session of the General Conference was therefore a moment of great personal satisfaction.

Today marks another historic moment in the life of the Convention.

I am delighted that we begin our meeting with the highly symbolic number of 100 States Parties. Indeed, the rapid rate of accession since the Convention's adoption has been both breathtaking and gratifying, allowing it to enter into force on 20 April 2006. As another 4 States have already deposited their instrument of ratification, this trend appears set to continue. The improving geographical spread and balance of States Parties is another source for celebration. This, more than sheer numbers, is vitally important in facilitating the international cooperation at the heart of the Convention.

As you are all aware, in a few moments we will witness the creation of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, when all 90 elements of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, emanating from 70 countries, are formally incorporated into the Representative List. This is a landmark occasion.

Another important moment of the work of the Committee will be its recommendation to the General Assembly concerning the accreditation of non governmental organizations that will provide advisory services to the Committee. The three additional Operational Directives concerning the visibility of the Convention, the use of the emblem, as well as the means to increase the resources of the Fund will also

be of great importance for the future operations of the Convention. Last but not least, the subsidiary body that will have the important role of examining nominations for the Representative List will be established here in Istanbul.

Looking ahead, I am pleased to announce that UNESCO has received a total of 111 applications from 35 States for the inscriptions on the Representative List to be examined by the Committee in late 2009. While this attests to the growing worldwide interest in safeguarding living heritage, I would like to express my hope that more States in future will put forward elements for inscription in order to achieve a regionally balanced Representative List.

I am confident that with time, this List - designed to give more visibility to our living heritage - will contribute to raising awareness of its importance and instil a sense of pride and belonging to custodian communities. This is key to ensuring the transmission of these irreplaceable expressions to future generations, and I am honoured to have been so closely associated with its creation.

The Committee's fourth session will also see the creation of the Urgent Safeguarding List, and in this regard I would like to recall that the deadline for the submission of nominations for inscription to it in 2009 is still a few months away, on 16 March.

Before closing, I should like to reiterate my thanks to Reeks Smeets who left us last July after 5 excellent years as Chief of the Intangible Heritage Section and Secretary of the Convention. I should also like to welcome his successor, Cécile Duvelle. As many of you know, Cécile was for nine years part of my Cabinet where among other important tasks, she was the focal point for the culture sector, including for the 2003 Convention. The Convention is therefore no stranger to her! With her dedication to UNESCO, and her outstanding personal and intellectual qualities, I am confident that Cécile will make a remarkable contribution to its implementation under the guidance of Françoise Rivière, ADG for culture.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your agenda is very full. The tasks and responsibilities of the Intergovernmental Committee are numerous and important. I therefore wish you every success in your deliberations and thank you for your attention.