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Address by  
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of the United Nations Educational,  
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the opening of the first meeting of the  
International Coordination Committee for the  
Safeguarding of Iraqi Cultural Heritage

UNESCO, 24 May 2004

Honourable Minister of Culture of Iraq,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to open today at UNESCO Headquarters, in the presence of the Minister of Culture of Iraq and eminent international and Iraqi specialists, the first meeting of the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Iraqi Cultural Heritage. I should like to thank you all most warmly for attending this meeting, in particular Mr Moufid al Jazairi, the Minister whom I am happy to meet for the third time, after his visits to Headquarters in October and February last, during which we spoke at length about our shared ambitions for culture in Iraq. Mr Minister, I know how much your country is suffering in these dark moments, and we have all been terribly shocked by the sudden death of Mr Ezz-El-Din Salim, President of the Iraqi Council, in the attack that took his life last week. Mr Minister, I wish to endorse solemnly before you the statement made by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in strongly condemning that criminal and tragic act and to extend to you our deepest condolences in my own name and on behalf of UNESCO.

Mr Minister,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting is undoubtedly a crucial stage for the protection of Iraq's cultural heritage. The International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Iraqi Cultural Heritage, established under the joint auspices of the Iraqi authorities and UNESCO, aims to assure that all activities in support of the protection of Iraq's cultural heritage are coordinated properly. In accordance with its Statutes, which were adopted at the 167th session of the Executive Board of UNESCO, the Committee is composed of experts appointed in their personal capacities whom I have chosen from the list proposed by Member States. I should like to thank you all most warmly for enthusiastically accepting this task. I am also pleased to inform you that the Mr Minister of Culture has accepted my proposal to chair the meeting, for which I am sincerely grateful.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

One year ago, when the situation in Iraq was one of great turmoil, the National Museum of Baghdad was savagely pillaged to the stupefaction of the whole international community. An entire portion of a people's historical memory thus vanished, as thousands of objects were stolen and the facilities and remaining museum pieces were destroyed. The National Museum, which had held priceless treasures, lost many of its pieces within the space of one day, after its facilities and laboratories had been wrecked. The looting alone symbolized an intolerable blow to the cultural heritage of humanity and aroused great concern within the international community and the general public.

As we know, it was not the only target of such outrage. The National Library and the National Archives were set alight, which caused irreparable damage, as more than 70 per cent of a fine collection of ancient manuscripts were lost forever. Many cultural institutions, such as the Ottoman complex of Al-Sarai, in the heart of Baghdad, were looted at the same time. Outside Baghdad, the situation was not much better. Scores of archaeological sites were ransacked, giving rise to illicit

excavations and trafficking in antiquities whose ramifications rapidly reached international proportions.

UNESCO swung immediately into action. It alerted the authorities of all the countries concerned and dispatched two on-site assessment missions led by the Assistant Director-General for Culture, Mounir Bouchenaki. Specialized agencies and scientists soon began to cooperate and UNESCO was naturally well placed to play a coordinating role in the safeguarding efforts.

In fact, the entire cultural fabric, whether in regard to archaeological sites, historic buildings, museums and cultural institutions, libraries and archives, the intangible cultural heritage or even the arts and cultural industries, has been affected by more than ten years of embargo and conflict in the country.

The challenge is therefore enormous, and vital. Indeed, empowering the Iraqi people to renew contact with their cultural roots, while reminding humanity of what it owes to this millennia-old civilization, and to think about their own future – a future of continuity and change, tradition and invention, which they must devise according to their own development plans – must be not only a goal for Iraq but also the instrument of its emancipation in a democratic and pluralist society. It is to such an end that UNESCO takes action in the field of culture in Iraq and elsewhere and the Committee will bear this in mind in its proceedings. It is also the reason why I have taken the initiative in convening the first Iraqi Cultural Forum to reflect on possible cultural policies for Iraq. I have ensured that it is held after this Committee meets so that our entire approach in the field of culture will bear the hallmarks of a shared vision.

Mr Minister, as we share your conviction that “democracy and culture are indissociably linked and that democracy is not possible without culture” – and here I quote your remarks at our meeting last October – we have argued relentlessly the case for culture to be included in emergency plans drawn up by the international community for countries in post-conflict situations in the same way as security, education and health measures. With regard to your country, we called for culture to be included in the emergency measures taken within the framework of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), and we advocated that view when we took part in the international conferences that were held in the past year in New York, Dubai and Madrid, thereby contributing to the formulation of the United Nations overall strategic plan for assistance to Iraq.

And we were ultimately convincing. It was in November 2003, during consultations on United Nations operations in Iraq, that the “culture” component was fully incorporated into short- and medium-term strategies for the reconstruction of Iraq, after we had outlined our activities in this field. It had become apparent to all that culture was not only an important means of safeguarding the cultural identity of the Iraqi people but also a very promising means of restoring stability in the country. Iraq’s Ministry of Planning and Development and the donor community met in February 2004 in Abu Dhabi, and the Strategic Plan was adopted as the overall framework for United Nations assistance in the fields of humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation and priority development areas. Since then, we have maintained close contact with the Iraqi ministries and authorities concerned in order to draw up joint work plans reflecting a shared vision and to coordinate planned priority activities.

Mr Minister,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On 17 April 2003, immediately after the National Museum in Baghdad was looted, UNESCO held at its Headquarters in Paris the first international meeting of experts to make a comprehensive preliminary assessment. The second meeting, held jointly with the British Museum in London on

29 April, focused on the urgent needs for the rehabilitation of the National Museum. At the third meeting, held on 1 August in Tokyo, needs for the rehabilitation of the Museum, particularly the laboratories and storage areas, were clearly identified. It became apparent at that meeting that an International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Iraqi Cultural Heritage should be established under the auspices of the Iraqi Government and UNESCO.

Those three meetings of experts enabled UNESCO to draw up an inclusive short-, medium- and long-term strategy and to devise measures to protect Iraq's cultural heritage and to combat trafficking in and prohibit the export of cultural objects. A moratorium on international trade in objects belonging to Iraqi cultural heritage was accordingly imposed in Security Council resolution 1483, dated 22 May 2003, which also called on UNESCO to propose all necessary measures to that end.

The two missions dispatched by UNESCO to Iraq in May and June 2003 made an initial assessment of the extent of the damage and losses sustained. They also laid the foundations for this Committee's work. A list of priority tasks was drawn up in coordination with the Director of the Museum, the Director of Research and the Director-General of the Department of Iraqi Antiquities.

Today's meeting confirms our commitment to remaining mobilized and to coordinating action to protect and rehabilitate Iraq's cultural heritage. It is only under a consolidated inclusive strategy that we can ascertain what must be done in the short, medium and long terms.

Despite the current situation, and in accordance with the instructions of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, UNESCO is pursuing its action in the field of culture in Iraq through 13 projects relating to archaeological sites and historic buildings, museums and cultural institutions, libraries and archives. Such action has been possible because of generous financial support from several countries, which have thus resolutely confirmed their confidence in UNESCO. Here I refer in particular to Belgium, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey, and to a number of international institutions and countries that have offered technical assistance, namely Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States of America.

UNESCO is also continuing action to combat trafficking, in particular by training border guards and officers to patrol the archaeological sites, thanks to assistance provided by the Italian authorities.

The rehabilitation of the laboratories of the National Museum is under way, thanks to a contribution from the Japanese Government, and a centralized database for Iraqi cultural property is being established in close cooperation with INTERPOL and ICOM, with funding from the Swiss authorities. Trafficking, the training of a substantial number of professionals, the rehabilitation of archaeological sites and historic buildings, illicit excavations and all kinds of looting are still of course being given great attention by UNESCO.

Attention is not being given to the tangible heritage only, for Iraq's intangible heritage is equally and outstandingly diverse and in need of urgent attention. The proclamation, on the recommendation of the International Jury, of the Iraqi Maqam as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity at the second proclamation ceremony last November was indeed a great source of satisfaction to us all, and I shall strive to give whatever assistance is necessary to ensure that this musical art can take its rightful place in contemporary Iraqi society and is handed down to future generations. The provision of equipment for the National School of Music and Dance, which we have undertaken, should also contribute to that goal.

Honourable Minister,  
Your Excellency the Ambassador of Italy to UNESCO,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite its exceptionally rich heritage, Iraq had secured the inclusion of only one site – the ancient city of Hatra – in the World Heritage List up to last year. Ashur, the first capital of the Assyrian Kingdom, was placed on the list last July. The city, the cradle of Mesopotamian civilization and birthplace of writing and urban planning, was also placed immediately on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Emergency international assistance was then granted so that a plan of action might be drawn up. Work has since been done to update the site's management plan, which will serve as a framework for its short- and long-term conservation.

In the last few years, Iraq had placed eight properties, including Ur, Nineveh and Samarra, on its tentative list. All these sites, even if they are not on the World Heritage List, urgently need assistance and protection, especially now that acts of vandalism are becoming rife.

UNESCO could not, however, provide assistance effectively under the World Heritage Convention because Iraq had been unable to pay its contributions to the World Heritage Fund after the embargo was imposed on it in 1991. Iraq could not therefore receive international assistance under the Convention. In addition, the extrabudgetary funds identified by the World Heritage Centre were insufficient to meet the country's enormous needs.

That situation was unacceptable. It will be recalled that Iraq has played a major role at UNESCO in promoting the preservation of the cultural heritage. Among the first to ratify the World Heritage Convention (in 1974), Iraq hosted, until the first Gulf War, a highly renowned Regional Training Centre for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage, established in cooperation with our Organization and ICCROM.

Nor has UNESCO forgotten Iraq's very generous contribution in 1990 to the Library of Alexandria, yet another example of Iraq's longstanding tradition in the preservation of culture.

I therefore wish to express UNESCO's sincere gratitude to the Italian authorities for their gesture today. Their particularly generous contribution to the World Heritage Fund will enable the World Heritage Committee to mobilize emergency assistance for the heritage sites in Iraq.

The Italian Government's generosity today, which consists in helping the Iraqi authorities to pay their debt to the Heritage Fund, is therefore both very significant and appropriate. It will enable Iraq to submit requests for international assistance and also to submit nominations, if it so desires, to the World Heritage Committee. UNESCO hopes that many other Iraqi sites will soon find their place on the World Heritage List, thereby doing justice to its outstandingly rich and valuable cultural heritage.

I therefore wish to seize this opportunity to congratulate Italy most warmly on this demonstration of extraordinary international solidarity, which is further proof of the generosity that it has displayed on many occasions in our Organization. This is yet another illustration of Italy's deep-seated commitment to the heritage, over and above many other initiatives that have been carried out thanks to its generous financial and technical support.

I therefore wholeheartedly thank the Italian Government, through its Ambassador to UNESCO, Mr Francesco Caruso, and I again congratulate it on its unwavering support for the ideals of the Organization.

I am also particularly happy to announce today that UNESCO's programme for the rehabilitation of Iraqi cultural heritage has been submitted to the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) under the Iraq special account. The programme, which comprises nine new large-scale projects, to which the Iraqi Minister of Culture has given priority, and proposes urgent measures in all the fields of culture, was approved last week with funding amounting to \$5.5 million, thanks to financial contributions from Japan and the European Union. This is yet another example of solidarity that deserves to be commended. The importance of effective coordination by UNESCO is obvious in respect of all projects in support of the Iraqi cultural heritage that are financed through multilateral aid, but it is also necessary for projects under bilateral initiatives, since they too must be properly coordinated to ensure that they fit harmoniously into the overall strategy.

Such coordination is the goal of this present Committee, which I invite to formulate whatever recommendations may be appropriate to promote and safeguard Iraqi cultural heritage. Indeed, the protection of one of the most ancient heritages of the world is at stake, in both its tangible and intangible forms, and we are duty-bound to do all in our power to achieve such protection.

I therefore wish you every success in your work.