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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address
by
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Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

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

UNESCO, 22 June 2005

Mr Minister of Culture,
Mr Minister of State for Tourism and Archaeology,
Mr Ambassador of Iraq to UNESCO,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to open the second meeting of the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Iraqi Cultural Heritage today at UNESCO Headquarters in the presence of the Minister of Culture and the Minister of State for Tourism and Archaeology of Iraq and distinguished Iraqi and international specialists. I thank you all most warmly for coming, in particular the Minister of Culture, Mr Nuri Farhan al-Rawi, and the Minister of State for Tourism and Archaeology, Mr Hashim al-Hashimi, whom I should like to congratulate on their recent appointment.

Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This second meeting no doubt marks a crucial stage for the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage. At the end of the third meeting of UNESCO experts held in Tokyo in August 2003, the participants called for assistance from UNESCO, requesting me to set up an international coordination committee for the safeguarding of the Iraqi cultural heritage.

The International Coordination Committee was set up in September 2003, during the 167th session of UNESCO's Executive Board, under the auspices of Iraq's Ministry of Culture, with the aim of coordinating both international assistance for the safeguarding of cultural heritage and all activities to promote the protection of such heritage and of drawing up an implementation programme consistent with the most stringent international standards in that field.

In accordance with its Statutes, 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.

The committee's first meeting, which was held on 23 and 24 May at UNESCO Headquarters, resulted in the formulation of a series of recommendations which guided our work in the following months. The main goal of the second meeting of the International Committee is therefore to review and assess the activities carried out so far and define our future objectives – in the short and long term – in order to safeguard and rehabilitate Iraqi tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the most appropriate manner.

Today's meeting confirms our shared commitment to continuing and coordinating our efforts. I am particularly pleased to note that there are many Iraqi experts among us, which can but ensure the success of our initiatives. I should also like to thank the Italian Government most warmly for continuing to provide funding for the Secretariat of the International Committee.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two years ago, amid great turmoil, the Baghdad Museum was ruthlessly pillaged, to the stupefaction of the whole international community, and fire raged in the building housing the National Library and National Archives for three consecutive days, resulting in the incalculable loss of its rich collections of publications and historical documents and all of its operational equipment. Many cultural institutions, including those outside Baghdad, suffered the same fate. This episode symbolized an intolerable blow to the cultural heritage of humanity and caused a great stir in the scientific community and in public opinion.

Since April 2003, UNESCO has been working on the formulation of a comprehensive strategy for the safeguarding of Iraqi cultural heritage. Two missions of experts were dispatched to Iraq in May and June 2003, under the leadership of Mr Mounir Bouchenaki, Assistant Director-General for Culture, in order to start identifying priority areas of action in close cooperation with the Iraqi authorities. Three international meetings of experts were held between April and August 2003, the first just a few days after the looting of the Iraq Museum. The cultural programme drawn up on the basis of these initiatives was included in the comprehensive strategy for the reconstruction of Iraq formulated by the United Nations system in February 2004.

Today, thanks to the international scientific community's immediate response and financial support from several UNESCO Member States, the Organization has begun work on the reconstruction of various cultural institutions in Baghdad and has initiated a number of urgent protection activities in other parts of the country.

An accurate assessment of the situation outside Baghdad cannot yet be made and our main objective will be to do so in the near future, as looting and illicit excavations are continuing on archaeological sites and historical buildings. It is an inestimable loss, not only to Iraq but to all humanity.

Although many sites are yet to be inventoried, over 10,000 archaeological sites have already been identified and recorded on the list drawn up by the Iraqi National Antiquities and Heritage Council. They include the famous remains of Ashur, Ctesiphon, Eridu, Hatra, Isin, Khorsabad, Kish, Lagash, Larsa, Nimrud, Nineveh, Samarra, Ur and Uruk. Two of these have been placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List: Hatra in 1985 and Ashur in 2003.

As you know, illicit excavations on archaeological sites are still, unfortunately, destroying Iraq's heritage, particularly in the south of the country, in such major sites as Isin, Umma and Umm al-Aqarib. We must take action, as soon as possible, against the installation of military bases on or near archaeological sites such as Hatra, the ancient capital of the Parthian Empire, and Babylon, in view of the risk of irreversible damage.

A technical meeting of this Committee's experts will therefore be held, at the request of the Iraqi authorities, to discuss the archaeological site of Babylon on 24 June here at UNESCO Headquarters, in Room XVI, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., its purpose being to make an initial assessment and propose emergency measures.

Trafficking, the training of professionals, the protection of archaeological sites, the rehabilitation of historical buildings, illicit excavations and all kinds of looting are still, of course, sources of great concern to UNESCO, and it is on those fronts that we intend to step up our efforts. I therefore invite the Committee to make whatever recommendations it considers appropriate on

this subject. It is the protection of heritage that is among the most ancient in the world which is at stake and we are duty-bound to do everything in our power to protect it.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Protection and rehabilitation are processes that call for an international pooling of efforts and long-term strategies.

UNESCO has received financial contributions for the implementation of field projects from the Governments of Italy, Japan, Switzerland, Flanders, Norway, Turkey, the Czech Republic and Latvia. Other UNESCO Member States such as Germany, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Netherlands, Poland, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Jordan, Egypt, Spain and Switzerland have expressed their desire to contribute to the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage by offering technical assistance. UNESCO has also received contributions to the Special Account for the Iraqi cultural heritage, in particular from Greece and the Holy See, while Saudi Arabia has pledged financial assistance. As part of the United Nations comprehensive strategy for action in Iraq under the UNDG Trust Fund for Iraq, a complete programme for the rehabilitation of Iraqi cultural heritage, amounting to a total of \$5.5 million over a three-year period, was approved on 20 May 2004. Phase I activities carried out in 2004 were financed to a large extent through a \$1.5 million contribution from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Phase II, costed at \$2 million, for which the tendering process has been initiated with potential donors, could be implemented in the second half of 2005.

Thanks to these contributions and despite the security conditions prevailing in the country, UNESCO has been very active in Iraq in the last two years; the Organization is carrying out several projects amounting to a total of \$8 million, drawing not only on the UNDG Trust Fund, but on other trust funds as well. As soon as we are authorized by the United Nations to establish premises in Iraq, I shall open the UNESCO Office in Baghdad, which is currently operating from Amman. This will enable us to have a much greater impact on the ground and to develop our operational capacities. I do hope that this will happen soon. I also wish to send a third mission of experts there as soon as the situation allows.

The implementation of the second phase of the UNDG programme is essential if our action in the area of culture is to succeed. It covers capacity-building and training and concerns national cultural and educational policies, which have already been addressed in Phase I activities in 2004. The very positive results of that phase show the extent to which Iraqi participants wish to improve their skills and benefit from the most recent methodologies in this area, while restoring networking activities with cultural institutions throughout the world.

Nevertheless, culture is still in a difficult position and negotiations are under way with potential donors to secure financial contributions under UNDG mechanisms for cultural activities. I therefore invite you to continue your commitment alongside our Organization in order to provide the necessary assistance to the Iraqi authorities in this area, and I call on Member States to continue their financial efforts to enable the second phase of the UNDG programme for culture to be implemented.

I should also like to congratulate the Ministry of Culture of Iraq for holding the second Cultural Forum in Baghdad from 12 to 14 April 2005, which yielded very positive results. UNESCO is pleased to have been associated with that initiative, which helps to strengthen dialogue and debate among Iraqi intellectuals, thus paving the way for a high-quality cultural policy for Iraq.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to conclude by assuring Iraq's Minister of Culture and Minister of State for Tourism and Archaeology that the UNESCO Secretariat is ready to extend to them all possible assistance.

I wish you every success in your work.