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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the White House Conference
on Global Literacy

New York, 18 September 2006

Mrs Bush,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to begin by congratulating Mrs Laura Bush for her initiative in hosting this first-ever White House Conference on Global Literacy. In her role as Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade, Mrs Bush has taken her inspirational work for literacy in America and extended it across the world. Today's Conference marks a major breakthrough in the international community's engagement with the global literacy challenge.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome Mrs Bush's announcement of a one million dollar pledge to the UNESCO Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP). Improved monitoring will be absolutely essential to our success in meeting international literacy targets. UNESCO deeply appreciates your generous support in this area. Thank you very much.

We have learnt this morning about the power of literacy and its importance for the exercise of freedom and democracy, for individual fulfilment, and for effective social and economic participation. In particular, we have seen the far-reaching implications of female literacy – on health, nutrition, household income, education and all aspects of family well-being.

Your initiative, Mrs Bush, has helped to draw attention to the enormous impact of literacy. It has also directed attention to the hundreds of millions of women, men and children who are deprived of its benefits.

UNESCO is working hard to put an end to this intolerable situation, both through its international coordination of the UN Literacy Decade, and through the launch of its special Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), which targets the needs of countries facing the greatest literacy challenge.

I am confident that the presence here of so many eminent and distinguished persons will create new momentum and boost our efforts to provide literacy to all as a basic human right.

UNESCO will sustain and build on this renewed impetus through the organization in 2007-2008 of a series of high-level Regional Conferences. These Conferences will address specific regional challenges in literacy, with the aim of building cooperation among stakeholders and mobilizing resources for concrete interventions at country level.

I am delighted to announce that the first Regional Literacy Conference for the Arab region will be hosted in Qatar on 12-14 March 2007 by Her Highness Sheikha Mozah, UNESCO Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education. The Regional Conference for Europe and Central Asia will be hosted in Azerbaijan by Mrs Mehriban Aliyeva, First Lady of Azerbaijan and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. The Regional Conferences for Africa and for Latin America and the Caribbean will be held in Mali and Costa Rica respectively. Let me add that we have already received several firm offers from countries in the Asia and Pacific region, and will announce our decision as soon as possible.

UNESCO is extremely grateful for these generous commitments. We also deeply appreciate the continuing support of the UN Foundation. It is my hope that these Regional Conferences will provide the platform for forging new partnerships in support of literacy.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: it is our responsibility to ensure that today's landmark event serves to place literacy at the centre of the international development agenda. Your leadership, Mrs Bush, has created a unique opportunity to accelerate and expand efforts towards achieving global literacy. UNESCO greatly looks forward to working with you during the follow-up Regional Conferences and, beyond that, to continuing to strengthen our action in support of the UN Literacy Decade and LIFE. We must maintain our outspoken advocacy for literacy as a lever of individual empowerment and an instrument for building stable and prosperous societies. We must also redouble our efforts to help countries develop effective strategies for meeting their literacy needs.

The task before us is immense; but by working together I am convinced that we will meet the challenge. It can be done.