

Statement by H.E. Mr. Edward NALBANDIAN
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia,
38th session of UNESCO General Conference

06 November, 2015

Monsieur le Président,
Mesdames et Messieurs,

Je félicite Monsieur Stanley Smataa pour son élection en tant que Président de la 38^e session de la Conférence générale de l'UNESCO, et adresse tous nos remerciements au Président sortant Monsieur Hao Ping.

Monsieur le Président,

Depuis sa création en 1945, l'UNESCO a accompli un travail remarquable en réunissant les pays dans leurs efforts en faveur de la promotion de la paix et du développement durable à travers l'éducation, la science et la culture.

Dans le cadre des célébrations du 70^e anniversaire, l'Arménie a accueilli la Conférence internationale sur «Le rôle de la culture dans l'Agenda du développement durable après 2015» avec la participation des représentants de plus de 40 pays et organisations internationales. La «Déclaration d'Erevan», adoptée par la Conférence, condamne la destruction des trésors du patrimoine culturel de l'humanité. Malheureusement, aujourd'hui cette question est devenue plus cruciale que jamais

À cet égard, la situation actuelle au Moyen-Orient est un sujet de grave préoccupation.

La destruction par les terroristes, de plusieurs lieux sacrés, des monuments culturels anciens de Palmyre et de Nimrud, l'explosion de l'église arménienne des saints martyrs à Deir ez Zor qui abritait les restes des victimes du Génocide arménien et d'autres actes barbares constituent des crimes contre la civilisation. Ils nous rappellent les crimes semblables perpétrés contre l'héritage culturel de l'humanité – la destruction des statues monumentales de Buddhas de Bâmiyân, des mausolées de Tombouctou, des milliers de Croix de pierre arméniennes au Nakhitchevan et d'autres monuments. Ces crimes, qui n'ont pas été réprimés à l'époque, ont frayé la voie à de nouvelles atrocités. L'histoire nous montre que l'impunité donne naissance à de nouvelles crimes.

Mr. President

In an era when the protection and promotion of human rights are considered to be the underpinning concept for the civilized world, intolerance towards the values of civilization belonging to others, intentionally damaging or destroying cultural or religious heritage, must be condemned with the same resolve and determination as violence against people. The international community should act in a resolute and timely manner to protect what is still possible to preserve.

Mr. President,

Armenia has continuously drawn the attention of this high body to the appalling situation of the Armenian cultural heritage in neighboring Azerbaijan. In Nakhijevan region alone thousands of medieval cross-stones, hundreds of Armenian churches, monasteries and other sacred sites have been completely destroyed by Azerbaijan in an attempt to erase all traces of the people who have inhabited the region for centuries and who gave the name to it - "Nakhijevan", which in Armenian literally means "the first place of descent", a reference to the descent of Biblical Noah. In its recently published report for 2015 the US Commission on International Religious Freedom has made a reference to the vandalized Armenian cemetery in Nakhijevan and reported that the religious freedom in Azerbaijan has further deteriorated, including by bringing examples of Baku's only remaining Armenian church which is currently used as an archive for the Presidential administration and the confiscated Lutheran Church turned into a concert hall. If we – UNESCO and other international organizations, do not act today what would be the future of those and many other endangered monuments tomorrow?

In a sharp contrast to this, neighboring Iran has made great efforts to preserve and protect the Armenian cultural heritage. The Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran, the oldest of which dates back to the 7th century, were inscribed on the World Heritage List by the Iranian Government. On our part, Armenia reconstructed the Iranian 18th century Blue Mosque in Yerevan, and is going to inscribe it on the World Heritage List.

Armenia tries to make its own contribution to the efforts aimed at preservation of the world's cultural heritage, including through constructive engagement in the relevant bodies of UNESCO. In 2013 Armenia became a member of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Event of Armed Conflict. A year later we were elected a Vice-chair of the Committee's Bureau. This year we have joined the Subsidiary Committee to the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of cultural property.

Mr. President,

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education stipulate that education shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups. Taking into consideration UNESCO's unique role in the sphere of education, we call upon the Organization to create within its educational programs an overview mechanism that will examine and evaluate the textbooks of the member-states, especially in history and social sciences, with a special emphasis on exclusion of intolerance and xenophobia. Azerbaijan attempts to distort and alter the centuries old Armenian heritage, culture and history. In this country the rewriting of its own history is continued by means of misappropriation or annihilation of the traces of other cultures on their territory, or even more, by privatizing the cultural heritage of the neighboring nations. A country that appeared on the political map of the world less than a hundred years ago has cultural claims towards a country and a people the several millenniums' history of which is recorded from the ancient times.

As a member of the UNESCO family we have committed to developing more inclusive education system, proscribe any form of discrimination, promote equal opportunities for all in education. In this regard I would like to highlight the importance of not leaving anyone outside of the educational programs and projects of UNESCO, including those living in the territories the political status of which is not determined pending the settlement within negotiation processes. UNESCO has to ensure the inclusiveness of its own endeavors without distinction to political, economic, social or other considerations.

Mr. President,

70 years ago a shared objective of creating a better world for the generations to come formed the basis of this Organization. As long as its priorities and goals continue to be relevant the fulfillment of those aspirations will continue to require synergy of actions and full adherence to the UNESCO's values and principles. Any attempts to drag the Organization into a propagandistic discourse with the aim of promoting one's own political agenda at the expense or in contradiction of those values should be resolutely and timely proscribed.

Armenia is strongly committed to the ideals and goals of UNESCO and will continue expanding its involvement in the UNESCO initiatives and programs.

Thank you.