

ITALY

Mrs Director-General,

Mr. President of the General Conference,

Ministers,

Excellences,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm honored to be here today at UNESCO's General Conference, sharing my thoughts with you.

UNESCO celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. It's a special time, where its unique mandate becomes even more urgent. Many look up to its capacity to deliver on cultural heritage issues all around the globe.

We have all witnessed the appalling images of historical and archeological sites being destroyed by terrorist organizations. Cultural heritage is being systematically attacked on purpose, with the clear objective of erasing the symbols of a given country's culture, religion and past.

In order to tackle these urgent issues my country is ready to share its long experience in the field of safeguarding cultural heritage at risk, both at an international and national level. I believe that the destruction of the symbols of a nation's identity are direct blows against humanity, against its capability to preserve a country's history, traditions and roots for its future generations. UNESCO's Director-General referred to the terrorist attacks against archeological sites in the Middle East as "Cultural Cleansing" and I agree.

At the end of July, the Ministers of Culture from 83 Delegations gathered during the Milan EXPO and agreed on the need for a proactive role of the international community in this regard. The Milan Declaration, which was approved on that occasion, reinforced the idea of establishing a "United4Heritage" global coalition, as suggested by Mrs Bokova at the Bonn Conference.

Therefore, our Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, at the recent General Assembly, urged the United Nations to foresee a cultural component in all future peace missions where cultural heritage is at risk.

As far as UNESCO is concerned, Italy is engaged in strengthening the Organization's leading role in preserving world cultural heritage and combating the illicit trafficking. To achieve these goals, we believe that only a shared and coordinated approach will provide viable and efficient solutions by unifying the efforts that are being deployed on a bilateral basis by a growing number of Member States.

The United Nations has brought international attention to the phenomenon of the trafficking of archaeological heritage as a possible form of financing terrorism. It is in this frame that the Italian

Government has approved a few days ago specific and stronger penalties against illicit trafficking and destruction of cultural heritage goods. In the fight against illicit trafficking, let me also recall an effective and positive example of coordinated approach in which Italy played a significant role: The International Guidelines for Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Response, recently adopted by the UN General Assembly and soon to be published.

In other aspects, again as part of the United Nations, an appeal has been launched to consider the need to contemplate a cultural component in peacekeeping missions, under its auspices.

For all these reasons we have recently presented two important Resolutions, adopted by the Executive Board in April and October last, respectively, which aim at creating, under Unesco's coordination and in collaboration with Member States and relevant United Nations offices, a concrete mechanism for rapid intervention and mobilization in areas where Cultural Heritage is at risk. Both resolutions pave the way for concrete actions by the international community.

I believe that we, as Member States, can give a pivotal contribution by unifying our efforts through the establishment of national teams that UNESCO could rely on whenever needed; on a preventive basis or in the aftermath of a conflict to protect and reconstruct cultural heritage.

In Italy, we have already set up a national United4Heritage team, which is composed of experts from our Ministry of Culture and officers from the Carabinieri Department for the Protection of Cultural Heritage. This task force will act as rapid response team able to defend monuments and archaeological sites, ready to intervene in emergency situations, and especially before crisis occur.

This is only a first step. We all share the same responsibility of deploying every possible effort to avoid that people from different cultures, religions and traditions are deprived of their cultural roots and identity and obliged to flee from their country.

It is a global humanitarian and a security issue. This is the reason why we are firmly convinced that the international community should finally find the strength to face this problem at the United Nations level, also within the context of UN peacekeeping missions.

It is my Country's firm belief that the protection of cultural heritage and identity is key to fostering peace and social stability and that culture should be included in every sustainable development policy. The framework of the 2030 Agenda, recently approved by the General Assembly, recognizes that culture is not only an enabler and driver of economic growth, but also an important tool for resilience building in situations of protracted crises.

We hope that we may count on your Delegation's support as we continue our work in this direction here at UNESCO, in the next future months.

Thank you.