

Closing address

by

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**Extraordinary Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of
Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation**

Seoul, Republic of Korea, 28 November 2008

Mr Director of the Cultural Heritage Administration,
Distinguished Ambassadors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

After three days of particularly rich discussion, during which we had the opportunity to listen most advantageously to many experts on the return and restitution of cultural goods who have travelled from continents afar to celebrate the Committee's thirtieth anniversary, our session now draws to a close.

I must first acknowledge the extreme generosity, hospitality and efficiency of our hosts, in particular the Director of the Cultural Heritage Administration of the Republic of Korea and his entire team who have spared no effort, day and night, to provide us with the best possible conditions for the exciting discussions that we have held on the Committee's past and future work.

It is, in a sense, comforting to note that despite the very great expectations raised concerning return and restitution issues, and the Committee's occasionally unsatisfactory or frustrating responses to those who have recourse to it, both the Member States and invited experts have reaffirmed their support for this unique intergovernmental body and have expressed their desire for it to play a greater role by entrusting new functions to it and by setting out, to take up an expression used at the beginning of the session, a road map of sorts for the years ahead.

During the proceedings, you have displayed pragmatism, mutual trust and good will, and imagination. This encourages us to forge ahead, thus complying with the terms of reference that the General Conference of UNESCO set for the Committee 30 years ago.

We must therefore all continue to act together – representatives of UNESCO Member States, IGOs, NGOs, diplomats, lawyers, museum specialists and the Secretariat – mindful to invite representatives of civil society and the art market known to play a crucial role in the movement of cultural goods to take part in our work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Trafficking in cultural property currently has an annual turnover of almost \$20 billion. Yet, individuals, communities, police forces, museum curators, UNESCO and its Member States will never agree to allow the components of their culture, and thus their identity, to be destroyed by treasure hunters or to be the subject of financial speculation on a certain art market.

As we know, there is a pressing need to combat this scourge relentlessly and, in particular, to improve public information to raise a new and greater awareness of the seriousness of trafficking in cultural property and of the displacement of works of art that strips countries of more than three quarters of their heritage. As stressed by the founding father of the Committee, however, such a task cannot be accomplished if the spirit of understanding and solidarity does not prevail.

UNESCO and its Intergovernmental Committee are working to that end and know that they have not undertaken this formidable task alone. They can rely on the quality of your reflection, proposals and action to move forward.

I thank you for responding to our appeal and for meeting our expectations so conscientiously and wholeheartedly, for the moral (hopefully financial) support that you provide for the Committee's activities. I thank our hosts once more for their welcome, which has been as extraordinary as this conference.

I wish you a safe return journey to your respective countries and look forward to seeing you in the next few months at UNESCO so that we may continue to support the Committee that has now come of age.