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WORLD ARABIC LANGUAGE DAY

SUMMARY

This item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 190th session of the Executive Board at the request of Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

The corresponding explanatory note is attached hereto.

Action expected of the Executive Board: proposed decision in paragraph 14.

Explanatory note
concerning the proposed World Arabic Language Day

1. The Arabic language is the most widely used of the languages of the Semitic family, and one of the most widespread languages in the world, with more than 422 million speakers. Its users are spread around the region known as the Arab world, as well as in many other neighbouring areas, including Ahwaz, Turkey, Chad, Mali, Senegal and Eritrea. The Arabic language is highly important to followers of the Islamic religion as it is the language of the two fundamental sources of Islamic legislation: the Holy Koran and the prophetic *ḥadīth* – the sayings and deeds the Prophet Muḥammad (God bless him and grant him salvation) handed down orally and subsequently assembled in compendia. No prayer (or other form of worship) in Islam can be performed without knowing some phrases from the language. Arabic is also a major ritual language for many Christian churches in the Arab world. Furthermore, many of the most important Jewish religious and intellectual works of the Middle Ages were written in Arabic.
2. The spread of Islam endowed Arabic with a lofty status and it became the language of politics, science and literature for many centuries in the lands governed by Muslims. Arabic left its mark directly or indirectly on many other languages in the Islamic world, such as Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Urdu, Malay, Indonesian and Albanian, as well as African languages such as Hausa and Swahili and European languages, in particular Mediterranean, including Spanish, Portuguese, Maltese and Sicilian.
3. The Arabic language is taught officially or unofficially in Islamic countries and African countries that border on the Arab world. Arabic is the official language in every one of the Arab States and is also an official language in Senegal, Mali, Chad and Eritrea. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations system.
4. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is the bearer of a whole nexus of cultural expressions and conveys identity and the values and visions of the world. It is a vessel which contains cultural diversity and the dialogue among civilizations, and a bridge enabling closer relations between societies and a richer diversity of forms of expression and interaction and the exchange of support and empowerment. The Arabic language is located at the heart of this approach in view of its lexical stock from other languages. And it – the language itself – enriches these other languages with lexical compounds and terms.
5. Multilingualism – a factor in harmonious communication between peoples – is of particular importance as regards the agencies of the United Nations system; by encouraging dialogue, interaction and tolerance, it ensures effective and greater participation for all in the course of action of these organizations, as well as greater efficiency, better results and more active participation. The safeguarding and promotion of multilingualism should be assured by varied measures within the United Nations system in a spirit of partnership and communication.
6. The balance between the six official languages, namely, English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Chinese and Russian, has been a prime concern for all chief executives of United Nations agencies. A number of measures have been taken between 1946 and the present day to strengthen the use of the official languages to ensure that the United Nations system, its objectives and actions are understood by the public on the widest possible scale.
7. On 18 December 1973, the United Nations General Assembly, at its 28th session, decided by means of resolution 3190 (XXVIII) to include Arabic among the official and the working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees, and to amend accordingly the relevant provisions of the rules of procedure of the Assembly. Arabic had already been adopted as an official language at UNESCO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization and the Organization of African Unity.

8. On 17 November 1999, at the 30th session of its General Conference, UNESCO declared 21 February to be International Mother Language Day (proposed in document 30 C/DR.35 in order to promote linguistic and cultural diversity).

9. Pursuant to 33 C/Resolution 51, adopted on 20 October 2005 by the UNESCO General Conference at its 33rd session, and on the basis of the letter dated 26 February 2007 from the Director-General of UNESCO to the United Nations Secretary-General on the proclamation of 2008 as International Year of Languages, on 16 May 2007, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2008 International Year of Languages by means of resolution 61/266.

10. In the framework of supporting and strengthening linguistic and cultural diversity in the United Nations system, the United Nations Department of Public Information on 19 February 2010, reference number OBV/853 (PI/1926), announcing just before the celebration of International Mother Language Day, which takes place on 21 February every year, the decision to celebrate a world day for each of the six official languages of the United Nations. It decided that the international language days would be as follows:

- French Language Day would be marked on 20 March, International Francophonie Day;
- Chinese Language Day (in memory of Cangjie, creator of Chinese characters) would be marked on 20 April;
- English Language Day would be 23 April, the traditionally recognized birthday of William Shakespeare;
- Russian Language Day would be 6 June, the birthday of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin;
- Spanish Language Day would be celebrated on 12 October, traditionally observed as Día de la Hispanidad.

On 18 December 1973, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 3190 (XXVIII) on the inclusion of Arabic among the official and the working languages of the General Assembly.

11. The purpose of celebrating every one of the six language days is to raise awareness among Member States and the agencies and staff of the United Nations system of the history of each of these languages and their cultures and development. All speakers of each of these languages should prepare a programme of activities for the day of their language, including inviting well-known poets, writers and authors to take part in the celebrations, and develop publicity materials connected with the events. The Arabic language is no exception to this.

12. Marking all of the language days through a range of musical performances, literature readings, competitions, cultural shows, lectures, art exhibitions, plays and folk exhibitions and the creation of occasions to make better known the cultural and social treasure of the language in question, is an expression of the cultural diversity of the countries that speak the language, and an opportunity to discover more about the language and its contribution to human civilization.

13. The Arab Group at UNESCO will endeavour to fund the activities connected with the marking of World Arabic Language Day, and accordingly the proposed decision will not impose any financial obligations upon the Organization.

Proposed decision

14. In the light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to consider the following draft decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Aware of the Arabic language's role in and contribution to the safeguarding and dissemination of human civilization and culture,
2. Also aware that Arabic is the language of 22 of the Member States of UNESCO, that it is one of the Organization's official languages, that is spoken by more 422 million Arabs, and that more than 1.5 billion Muslims need to use it,
3. Understanding the need to implement more wide-ranging cooperation between peoples through multilingualism, cultural rapprochement and dialogue among civilizations, in line with what is set out in the Constitution of UNESCO,
4. Recalling resolution 3190 (XXVIII) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly of 18 December 1973 at its 28th session, by which it included Arabic as one of the official and the working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees,
5. Welcoming the decision announced on 19 February 2010 in document OBV/853-PI-1926 issued by the United Nations Department of Public Information, which concerns the celebration of international days for the six official languages of the United Nations and designates 18 December as World Arabic Language Day,
6. Appreciating the assurances provided by the Arab States and those with Arabic as an official language concerning the safeguarding, conservation and celebration of the language,
7. Invites the Director-General to include World Arabic Language Day on 18 December of every year as one of the international days marked by UNESCO.