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Organización
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
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联合国教育、
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Address by Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion of the International Conference on Cultural Heritage at

Risk, the Role of Museums in War and Conflict

Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities

Stockholm, 26 November 2015

Dr Christian Mühlenbock, Director of the *Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities*,

Mr Kurt Almqvist, President of the *Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation*,
Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank the *Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation* for this initiative.

Today's symposium resonates deeply with UNESCO's mandate, and this is especially meaningful in this year when we celebrate the Organisation's 70th anniversary and reflect on our vocation to build peace in the minds of people.

When we look back on UNESCO's achievements since its creation, the concept of world heritage is one.

The 1970 World Heritage Convention is more than 40 years old. It represents an extraordinary idea about cultural heritage holding outstanding universal value, about heritage uniting under a common understanding that is so important for building peace, promoting intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity. Many World Heritage sites are ones where you will find a rich range of different influences that permeate each other and teach us about history, religions, diversity and values.

At this very moment, this invaluable legacy of our common heritage is under attack, in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

We see heritage sites destroyed.

We see individuals persecuted on religious and cultural grounds.

We see cultural diversity and free thinking targeted.

This is part of a strategy to tear societies apart, a sectarian, doctrinal approach to intimidate and spread hatred, to sharpen intolerance, to erase memories, which I have called cultural cleansing.

Cultural cleansing is a *war crime*, that it is now used as a tactic of war.

We are witnessing looting and illicit trafficking that in some parts have reached an industrial scale, depleting entire sites, financing terrorist activities today, undermining social fabrics over the long term.

This is much more than a cultural issue.

It is a security imperative.

This is not a choice between protecting people or protecting culture. It is part of the same responsibility because culture is about belonging, identity, values, common history and the kind of world that we want to live in.

Beyond hard power, defeating violent extremism calls for new ways of acting, to get at the root causes of sectarianism and prevent hatred.

We need culture and heritage for reconciliation and resilience, to build self-confidence – to achieve peace and understanding.

Museums play a vital role here, to promote a vision of humanity united around its heritage.

Sweden understands this well. Here in Stockholm, the *Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities*, home to a major collection of Mesopotamian

cuneiform tablets and seals from Sumerian and Babylonian times, is a perfect place to share this message.

Museums are places to nurture a culture of peace, to promote new forms of global citizenship -- enriched by knowledge of the contribution of all cultures, by understanding the culture of others as our own.

Extremists are afraid of history and culture -- this is why they have sacked the Museum of Mosul, because it embodies dialogue among cultures, because it teaches lessons about cultural diversity as humanity's greatest strength.

In Syria and Iraq, despite the war, many professionals have decided to stay and work, to protect this heritage.

Khaled Al Assad paid for this with his life.

He was tortured, because he wanted to save Palmyra.

He was killed, because he believed the city embodied values of peace and mutual understanding that must be shared.

Palmyra is a dialogue between cultures – no one style can describe this “Venice of the sands.” This is why extremists want to destroy it – Palmyra stands for our common history and memory.

I wish to pay a special tribute today to all guardians, curators, officials, who demonstrate extraordinary courage to save culture, in Syria, in Iraq, Mali and elsewhere.

I wish to say loud and clear they are not alone.

UNESCO stands with them.

We all stand by their side, and we will support them in every way we can.

UNESCO is working on all fronts, bringing Member States and all partners together, to enhance the protection of our shared heritage.

This is why I launched the *Global Coalition Unite for Heritage*, at the World Heritage Committee last June.

We have joined forces with ICCROM to produce self-help guidance materials, to secure the endangered cultural heritage collections held by museums.

We are leading emergency interventions, to support museums and sites, in Libya, and elsewhere.

In Iraq, with the backing of Japan, UNESCO is working to strengthen the capacities of museums, to build inventories, to protect cultural goods and put them in safe places, when needed.

This is of vital importance today -- we know, for sure, that if many cultural objects could be put in safe places in Syria today, this is a result of the preventive work done in the past years.

We have crafted partnerships with many of you here today, and I wish to commend most of all the Pergamon Institute, represented today by Dr Markus Hilgert, with whom we document heritage under attack and join forces to strengthen the capacities of professionals.

UNESCO is leading implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199, to halt illicit trafficking and curb the financing of terrorism.

Over 35 States have shared information on how they are strengthening legislation and coordination mechanisms -- museums are on the frontline, joining forces with counterparts in conflict zones to offer expertise, to ensure the legal provenance and correct documentation of collections.

We must build stronger cooperation, among all partners, bringing together INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime,

the International Council of Museums and its Red Lists, and with many others outside the “culture box”, to link the humanitarian, cultural and security dimensions.

Last week at UNESCO, President François Hollande announced a series of measures, developed with the Louvre Museum, to fight against illicit trafficking and protect the memory of cultural properties in danger.

This is the spirit of the new strategy adopted by UNESCO Member States, to strengthen action to protect culture and promote cultural pluralism during armed conflict.

This is the spirit of UNESCO’s new international *Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society*.

An ever-increasing international flow of goods and people enrich the activities and resources of museums – this is an opportunity to respond to hatred with a counter narrative of peace, mutual understanding and knowledge.

This is the spirit of the #unite4heritage campaign I launched with the students at the University of Baghdad last March – we are taking this message across the world.

Personally, I have met with young men and women and heard the importance of heritage for them, as a force of resistance and resilience, in times of trial.

They know better than anyone we are not just talking about stones and buildings.

This is about values and identities, whose traces are kept in museums. This vision must be relayed through education.

In Timbuktu, I have seen for myself the power of culture to restore confidence, where UNESCO has rebuilt the mausoleums destroyed by violent extremists in 2012.

Museums are key for capacity building, advocacy and passing a strong message on the urgent need to put a stop to illicit trafficking, which is financing terrorism.

The collections of museums, including those around us here, shine a light on the path forward, a path towards a culture of peace, towards knowledge and towards tolerance for all.

It is our duty to share these values.

The protection of cultural heritage is part of the response to violent extremism and to building peace, resilience and reconciliation for the future.

I am grateful for your commitment.

Thank you.