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Cultural Organization

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pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Irina Bokova,  
Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the Conference of Culture Ministers of countries  
participating in Expo Milan**

**Milan, 31 July 2015**

Excellency Prime Minister Matteo Renzi,

Excellency Minister Dario Franceschini,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honored to address the distinguished participants of this international conference of culture ministers from countries participating in Expo Milan.

Italy welcomes the world and it is indeed a time when we need to join forces to tackle the challenges we face.

In Iraq, Syria, In Libya, in Yemen, along with a humanitarian crisis, we see unprecedented attacks against culture.

We see systematic violations of human rights and the persecution of people on ethnic and religious grounds.

We see the intentional destruction of irreplaceable landmarks, and organized looting for illicit trafficking.

We see the destruction of schools, attacks on journalists.

Never before in recent history have we seen such a brutal and systematic destruction of cultural heritage.

These attacks on culture are *war crimes*, and they are being used as a *tactic of war*, to spread sectarian violence and hatred.

All of this is part of the same strategy, which I call 'cultural cleansing.'

This is no longer a cultural issue only – it has become a security imperative, which is part and parcel of the humanitarian crisis.

It calls on us to review the means by which we seek to defeat violent extremism.

Italy has taken many initiatives at the forefront of international efforts for the protection of the cultural heritage under attack.

A few months ago we were together in Florence for the World Forum on Culture and Development, highlighting the key role of culture for mutual understanding, social cohesion and dialogue.

In February this year, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2199 on the financing of terrorism, banning trade of antiquities from Syria and Iraq, and we all know the unique role of *the Carabinieri* in our global fight against illicit trafficking.

In April, at the initiative of Italy, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on the "Destruction of cultural sites perpetrated by ISIS/Da'esh".

In May, the UN General Assembly adopted a Resolution on "Saving the cultural heritage of Iraq", which was preceded by two resolutions adopted by the Executive board of UNESCO, at the initiative of France and Iraq, and then Italy and Spain.

Most recently, the World Heritage Committee unanimously adopted the Bonn Declaration at its 39th session in Germany, where I have launched a global coalition *Unite4heritage*, with a view to bring together Member States, the civil society and the media.

Cultural heritage belongs to all of us – we can only protect it if we work together, engaging partners well outside the "culture box", from the security, humanitarian sectors, with local communities on the ground.

In this regard, I wish to commend the proposal by Italy to strengthen this Global Coalition through the establishment of a *Unite4heritage task force*, serving as an operating arm whenever a peace mission involves the safeguarding of cultural heritage

All of this is part of our efforts to include a consideration for culture in peacebuilding missions. We have seen positive example in Mali, where the MINUSMA has been the first peacekeeping mission to include the protection of heritage in its mandate – I was in Timbuktu last week, to celebrate the reconstruction of the 14 mausoleums which were destroyed in 2012.

This is the proof that culture is stronger than hatred, and whatever the obstacles, culture ultimately prevails.

This demonstrates the international community's growing awareness for the need to protect cultural heritage, and how it can contribute to foster resilience and consolidate peace.

In this spirit of hope and determination, I am deeply grateful for your invitation and I wish us all fruitful deliberations.