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Организация
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Ms Veronique Dauge, Head of Culture Unit of the UNESCO
Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice, Italy),
on the occasion of the second session of the Committee on Improving
Quality of Life, Exchanges between Civil Societies and Cultures
of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UfM)
on the theme
“Blue Helmets for Culture: a common commitment in memory of Khaled al-
Asaad”**

**Italian Chamber of Deputies,
Rome, 6 November 2015**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both an honour and a pleasure to participate in this session on “Blue Helmets for Culture: a common commitment in memory of Khaled el-Asaad”, in the presence of so many distinguished dignitaries and notably Italy’s Culture Minister, Mr Dario Franceschini; the Director-General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, Professor Maamoun Abdulkarim; and the Director-General of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, Dr Munther Jamhawi.

At the outset, I would like to convey the greetings of the Director-General of UNESCO, Ms Irina Bokova, who regrets not being able to join you today. Her presence is required at UNESCO’s General Conference which began this week. However I would like to reassure you that Ms Bokova attaches great importance to the critical issue we will be discussing today.

Ms Bokova was particularly shocked by the death of Khaled al-Asaad.

In her statement of 19 August condemning the murder, she declared in her capacity as UNESCO’s Director-General, – and I quote:

"They killed him because he did not betray his deep commitment to the site of Palmyra... He dedicated his life to this site, revealing and interpreting its rich history, so that we could all learn from this remarkable city, this crossroads of Antiquity. His work will remain out of reach of these extremists. They killed a great man but they will never silence history."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to extend my sincere thanks to the "Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean", for organizing this timely initiative, and all of the participants for coming together today.

Indeed, the topic of today's session is most timely, because we are just beginning to grasp the full implications of increasing attacks against cultural heritage and diversity.

As we all know, from time immemorial, cultural heritage has been subject to attack and destruction. Conflicts are not new. Throughout history, perpetrators have sought to strike at the hearts and souls of the enemy- to destroy a sense of identity and belonging, to weaken grounds for renewal. In recent history, we need only recall the conflicts in Southeast Europe and the deliberate destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar.

But what we are witnessing today, particularly in the Middle East, is different, in both scale and nature.

We see the deployment of a coherent strategy of what the Director-General of UNESCO has termed "cultural cleansing". Never before in recent history have we seen such brutal and systematic attacks against cultural heritage and diversity, used as a tactic of war, to intimidate populations, to disseminate hatred, to weaken the grounds for peace.

And the sad news is that this strategy continues to gather momentum.

In Syria, all six UNESCO World Heritage sites have been damaged by fighting -- four have been severely affected, including the Old Cities of Aleppo and Damascus.

Eight sites on the World Heritage Tentative list have been affected, destroyed or severely impacted by looting and illegal excavations, and at least six museums have suffered damage.

On 30 August, the Temple of Bêl in Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage, was destroyed by explosives.

On 4 October, the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra was blown up.

The Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo has become a battlefield.

In Iraq, two of four UNESCO World Heritage sites -- Hatra and Ashur – and at least nine other heritage sites have intentionally been destroyed.

The museum of Mosul has been vandalized.

Nimrud has been dynamited.

In Libya, at least eight religious sites have been damaged or destroyed, and many other sites remain threatened by looting and desecration.

In Yemen, we have seen the destruction of the Citadel of Taz, the Temple of Nakrah, in Barraqish and the Dhamar Museum -- the fabled Marib Dam and the Old Cities of Sana'a and Sada'a have been severely damaged by bombing.

Across the region, illegal excavations have taken on industrial scale, in part financing violent extremism.

Cultural cleansing is fuelled by a propaganda campaign, deployed on the Internet and through social media, targeting young people, to radicalise and create a sense of impunity for appalling acts.

Cultural cleansing involves massive violations of human rights, the persecution of communities on cultural and religious grounds.

Muslims, Yezidhis, Christians...all are being attacked.

Cultural cleansing involves the killing of all alternative voices of peace and dialogue, including journalists and intellectuals – such as the renowned scholar and humanist, Khaled Al Assad, to whom we are paying tribute today.

It seeks to eliminate all sources of diversity and pluralism, to impose a single, exclusive vision of society and culture and rewrite its history.

It is precisely this history that violent extremists are attacking -- to destroy symbols and voices of tolerance and diversity, to eliminate evidence that contradicts their exclusive and violent vision.

On the ground, cultural cleansing is tearing at the very fabric of society in Iraq and Syria, weakening sources of identity, memory and belonging. This is devastating for individuals and communities.

It undermines possibilities for future dialogue, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Violent extremists do not choose between attacks against culture and those against people – they attack both.

This is why we need to defend both.

This is about protecting values from the past that are important for societies today and tomorrow, for reconciliation, for peace.

This is about culture as a force of resilience and resistance, to face adversity and rebuild.

This is why cultural cleansing is no longer only a cultural emergency.

This is a security issue and a peacebuilding imperative.

This calls for new ways of thinking and acting.

This means acting outside the “culture box”-- by building a broad coalition, including actors in the security and humanitarian sectors, crafting policies that connect the dots between humanitarian, security and cultural imperatives.

UNESCO and its partners are increasingly engaged in emergency operations, building also on various resolutions of the UN Security Council and General Assembly. These include UN Resolution 2199, issued on 12 February 2015, which condemns unanimously the destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria, and adopts legally-binding measures to combat the illicit trafficking of antiquities and cultural objects from these countries.

We are monitoring damage, organizing training courses, providing technical assistance on the ground - when security conditions allow - building awareness, for example through the campaign Unite4Heritage, a social media campaign designed to counter the propaganda of cultural cleansing and the destruction of cultural heritage, to mobilize young people across the world for its protection.

We are working with many governments, scientific partners, the Red Cross, the International Criminal Court and many UN humanitarian agencies.

But this is not enough. There is an urgent need for new innovative solutions that will make it possible to protect culture and heritage even when security conditions are still precarious.

It is for this reason that UNESCO is particularly grateful to Italy for spearheading an initiative that may lead to the establishment of a rapid response mechanism, some have called it “Blue Helmets for Culture”, for the systematic integration of heritage within UN peace-keeping operations.

The modalities for the implementation of this mechanism, which is going to be discussed next week by UNESCO Member States at the General Conference, need to be further explored, in close consultation with the relevant UN bodies. The experience of Mali, where UNESCO works closely with the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission of the UN, will certainly provide useful lessons.

Various options are indeed available. Through human and financial resources made available by its Member States, moreover, UNESCO would also be able to respond

immediately to emergency situations where there are no security concerns, for example after a major natural disaster.

What is clear is that this is a very concrete and practical step that will greatly enhance the capacity of UNESCO to respond to this unprecedented challenge.

Moreover UNESCO knows that it will be able to count on the extraordinary experience of the Italian experts, including of its famous Carabinieri working to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural property, and which have become a model for heritage protection in every country of the world.

In conclusion, let me thank Italy for responding to the call made by Ms Bokova when she launched the Global Coalition “Unite for Heritage”, through the “Milan Declaration on Culture as an Instrument of Dialogue among Peoples”, and its initiatives at UNESCO, and Dr Jamhawi for Jordan’s active cooperation in the various programmes implemented by UNESCO in the region.

Our special gratitude and recognition should go to those, such as Professor Abdulkarim and his colleagues, who work and live in extremely difficult circumstances and who are deploying exceptional efforts to protect the cultural heritage of their country, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Today, the international community has a duty to demonstrate solidarity and provide concrete support. It is important to show that we all stand united to protect our common heritage, our shared history and identity.

We must harness the soft power of culture to build peace and respond effectively to violent extremism.

This is our shared commitment and responsibility for the benefit of future generations.

I thank you for your kind attention.