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**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the second session of the General Assembly
of the States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding
of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**

UNESCO, 16 June 2008

Mr Chairperson of the first session of the General Assembly,
Mr Chairperson of the Intergovernmental Committee,
Mr Chair of the Executive Board,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this second session of the General Assembly of the States Parties to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

This session is of vital importance because it will launch the operational phase of the Convention.

Over the last two years, the Intergovernmental Committee has made considerable headway. During its four sessions, both ordinary and extraordinary, held in Algiers, Chengdu, Tokyo and Sofia, the Committee worked hard to draw up a set of draft operational directives, which are presented to you today.

I would like to thank the authorities of the four host countries for their generous welcome, and for having placed four outstanding Chairpersons at the Committee's disposal, for the draft directives could not have been prepared without their competence and commitment.

I should also like to pay tribute to Mr Mohammed Bedjaoui, whom I am delighted to have here next to me. His masterful stewardship of all the preparatory and intergovernmental meetings, and of the first General Assembly of States Parties in

June 2006, has distinguished him as a key contributor to this Convention. The very first session of the Intergovernmental Committee was held in his native Algeria, in November 2006, and the outcomes you will examine today are the fruit of his invaluable efforts to reconcile points of view and achieve consensus.

I should also like to pay tribute to Mr Osman Faruk Loğoğlu, Ambassador in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Vice-Chairperson of the Turkish National Commission for UNESCO, who has participated in the work of the statutory organs of the Convention from the very beginning. Not only was he Rapporteur of the first session of the General Assembly and the first extraordinary session in November 2006, he is now Chairperson of the Intergovernmental Committee, having been elected unanimously in September 2007. He will have the important task of chairing the next session of the Committee, at which it shall incorporate the items proclaimed “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in the Representative List based on the directives that you will have adopted. I should like to take this opportunity to reiterate my gratitude to the Turkish authorities for their invitation and generous hospitality.

I am also delighted that Mr Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yaï, Chair of the Executive Board, is here with us. His presence is testimony not only to his personal attachment to the values of this Convention, which we have witnessed on many occasions, but also to the interest of the governing bodies of UNESCO in the Convention.

Lastly, I should like to acknowledge the representatives of the States Parties and of those not yet Party, who are here today. To date, 95 States have ratified the Convention, and others have announced their intention to do so shortly. I trust that today’s General Assembly and the conclusions it reaches will convince those still-uncertain States of the crucial importance of this Convention for cultural diversity, and that many of them will become States Parties.

As I said recently at the information meeting that I convened on 2 June in preparation for this Assembly, I am pleased to note that not only has the pace of ratification been rapid, but also that the geographical distribution of States Parties is becoming more and more balanced. Such balance is essential if there is to be effective international cooperation, particularly with regard to the exchange of information and experience.

Finally, many observers from non-governmental organizations and communities – which have a vital role to play in the implementation of the Convention – are here today. I am very pleased that they have joined us and wish them all a warm welcome.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your ambitious agenda requires you to scrutinise the draft operational directives prepared by the Intergovernmental Committee. They are presented in a compilation of 114 provisions divided into four chapters.

I am convinced that the decisions you make in relation to these will have a profound effect on the implementation and credibility of the Convention.

Without going into the detail of these provisions – which will be your main task over the coming days – I would like to underline that the Committee recommends a clear separation of the two lists, given their fundamentally different purposes. The Representative List is designed primarily to give greater visibility to intangible cultural heritage, increase awareness of its importance, and encourage dialogue as a means of contributing to the safeguarding of cultural diversity. The Urgent Safeguarding List is designed to give urgent assistance to elements at serious risk of disappearing, and for which international cooperation is essential. I hope that all States Parties will take advantage of both lists in proposing items for inscription, whether for raising awareness or for urgent safeguarding.

The set of criteria for each of the lists reflects their purpose, although they largely coincide. The Urgent Safeguarding List, with one more criterion, requires procedures that are more stringent than those proposed for the Representative List.

You will also be asked to consider draft operational directives providing for the incorporation into the Representative List of all items formerly proclaimed Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which I hope will enable the Committee to integrate them on the Representative List at its next session in Istanbul in November 2008.

As regards the calendar for inscribing elements on the two lists, the normal procedure for inscription on the Urgent Safeguarding List will take 18 months or, if preparatory assistance is requested, 24 months. The inscription procedure for the

Representative List has been set at 13 months, with the first new entries foreseen for autumn 2009. While it may seem paradoxical that an element whose viability is threatened must go through a longer procedure than a healthy one, the Committee considered that establishing a substantial and effective set of safeguarding measures most likely to succeed in “healing” an ailing element would require additional time and attention. I agree.

Nevertheless, in this particular instance, to allow the Committee to proceed with the first inscriptions on both lists simultaneously, it has submitted to the General Assembly a transitional timetable that will allow a first set of elements to be inscribed on the Urgent Safeguarding List within a 13-month period. This will allow international cooperation in safeguarding to begin promptly for those elements that are seriously at risk.

At each of its sessions, the Committee has attributed great importance to the selection and promotion of programmes, projects and activities which it considers best reflect the principles and objectives of the Convention, taking into account the needs of developing countries. It therefore proposes to establish and publish a register of selected programmes, projects and activities that would permit the greatest number of countries to benefit from best practice around the world in terms of awareness raising at the local, national and international level of the importance of the intangible heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof.

This brings me to the Committee’s proposals for the use of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund.

You will find that the Committee has expressed a clear preference for the largest part of the Fund to be allocated to international assistance, and for international assistance itself to be allocated according to the priorities of the Committee. These are, specifically, the safeguarding of heritage inscribed on the Urgent Safeguarding List, the preparation of inventories, capacity-building activities in developing countries, and the selection and promotion of best practices mentioned above.

While time does not permit me to go into any more detail, you will also consider proposals relating to the role and participation of communities, groups and individuals in the life of the Convention, as well as mechanisms governing reports on the legislative, regulatory and other measures taken by the States Parties for the implementation of this Convention.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In addition to the operational directives, you will be asked to decide on States' contributions to the Intangible Heritage Fund. I believe that the Committee's proposal to set a uniform percentage for an indeterminate period of time until it is decided otherwise, which would allow the Committee to programme its projects and financial assistance most effectively, warrants your full attention.

Moreover, the election of 12 new members of the Committee will undoubtedly be a key moment of this session. I take this opportunity to praise the 24 Committee members who have worked tirelessly over the last two years. I trust that the Assembly will find a way to devise a calculation system acceptable to all. The new Committee will, in fact, have the important mission of ensuring the first inscriptions in the Lists – a difficult, but undeniably thrilling task.

The four days ahead will therefore be a major turning point in the life of the Convention. The tremendous work done by the Committee is now in your hands, and I truly hope that the operational directives submitted to this session will be approved, for only through experience and practice can they be tested against reality and evolve to meet the concrete needs pertaining to the safeguarding of the intangible heritage.

I have high hopes that before the end of the year, the Convention will have passed the symbolic mark of 100 States Parties. Thereafter, if the proposed timetables – including the transitional timetable – are accepted by the Assembly, the first items could be inscribed on the two Lists of the Convention in autumn 2009, at the fourth session of the Intergovernmental Committee. The first inscriptions on the Representative List and on the Urgent Safeguarding List would then coincide.

Before I close, I should like to pay tribute in my own name, indeed, on behalf of us all to Mr Riëks Smeets, who has served as Chief of Intangible Cultural Heritage Section for the past five years, and as Secretary of the Convention since its entry into force, and who will be leaving us on 21 July 2008. His competence, personal involvement and hard work have, without a doubt, greatly contributed to the results we have seen to date. I am convinced that his expertise will yet be of great service to UNESCO in the years to come. And so, confident that this is not our final farewell, I wish him every success in his future endeavours.

Thank you.