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Organización
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Executive Board
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المجلس التنفيذي

执行局

Address by Ms Eleonora Mitrofanova, Chairperson of the Executive Board of UNESCO, on the occasion of the second session of the Meeting of States Parties to the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage

Paris, 1 December 2009

Dear Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentleman,

As the newly elected Chairperson of UNESCO's Executive Board, it is both an honour and a pleasure for me to participate in the opening of the second session of the Meeting of States Parties to the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

I can assure you that the Executive Board is committed to pursuing the Organization's illustrious achievements in the important sphere of standard-setting. Over the decades, UNESCO has distinguished itself as the foremost intergovernmental body devoted to the protection of the humanity's outstanding cultural and natural sites, most notably through the famed World Heritage Convention. In recent years, we have extended our watch over lesser known, but equally significant and often more vulnerable forms of cultural heritage, namely intangible and underwater heritage.

Underwater cultural heritage holds a great fascination for all people around the world. The mere mention of ancient shipwrecks, sunken cities and flooded caves stirs our imaginations. It is the awe-inspiring underwater environment that makes this heritage so special. We know that rich episodes of our history are preserved under the surface of our oceans and lakes. Research has revealed that a variety of submerged traces of millennia of human existence – from Neanderthal hunt sites to more recent shipwrecks - lie waiting to reveal their mysteries to researchers and the general public. Many keys to understanding decisive chapters of human civilization can be discovered under water.

State authorities, underwater archaeologists, divers, the tourism industry and the public at large have turned to UNESCO to take steps to save this precious heritage from looting, trawling and treasure hunting. Such is the crucial task that has been entrusted in the States Parties to this Convention.

As you are well aware, the 2001 Convention is unique in that it provides the first international framework for the protection of submerged archaeological sites. It establishes basic principles, high-level standards and practical guidelines but also regulates State cooperation practical and efficiently. Accordingly, I can hardly overemphasize the importance of this instrument.

As noted by Ms Bokova, the first session of the Meeting of its States Parties was very productive. I would also like to congratulate you on your efficiency and extend my thanks to the new States that ratified the instrument since the last session. Your dynamism will no doubt encourage more support for the Convention among other UNESCO Member States and the public at large.

During this meeting you will embark upon the critical task of elaborating the Operational Guidelines.

I qualify this as critical because many countries that have not yet States Parties, including my own country, the Russian Federation, are awaiting this text to determine how the implementation of these guidelines will affect them in order to decide if they are prepared to assume the responsibilities that come with ratification. Since the effectiveness of this Convention ultimately depends on successful cooperation between States, our objective is clearly to obtain the largest possible number of ratifications. In this way, UNESCO's normative action in favour of heritage protection and safeguarding cultural diversity will certainly be significantly strengthened.

I hope that your discussions will be enriching and fruitful.

On behalf of the Executive Board, I wish you success in your work.

Thank you.