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Statement by Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General, to the 191st Executive Board on Cultural Heritage in Syria

26 April 2013

Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board,

Excellencies,

Since the beginning of armed clashes in Syria, I have expressed on behalf of UNESCO deep concern about the dramatic humanitarian situation in Syria and the threats to its outstanding cultural heritage.

I have called upon all those involved in the conflict to ensure the respect and protection of this heritage, in line with the numerous statements of the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr Ban Ki-moon, to end violence and work for a political solution.

On 18 March, 2013, the UN Secretary-General stated,

"The country is facing a humanitarian crisis, with over three million people displaced from their homes, including one million seeking safety in neighbouring countries. Cities and villages, including some world heritage sites, have been destroyed."

Let me recap some of the actions I have taken on behalf of UNESCO.

On 30 March, 2012, I called for the protection of Syria's cultural heritage, following media reports that this heritage was threatened by the conflict.

I reiterate UNESCO is ready to support in assessing damage to Syria's cultural heritage, including the World Heritage sites, and in preparing plans for their safeguarding, as soon as this becomes possible.

In light of escalating violence, I issued further statements:

- on 26 July, alerting about the risk of looting and pillaging of cultural property in several urban historic areas;
- on 30 September, deploring the destruction of Aleppo's ancient souqs, a World Heritage site;
- on 12 October, denouncing the destruction of the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo;
- on 1 March, concerning the reports of heavy fighting in the historic areas of Aleppo, and most recently;
- on 24 April, expressing deep distress over the destruction of the minaret of one of Syria's most historic mosques.

In addition, on 15 March 2012, I contacted INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, the International Council of Museums and specialized police forces.

I contacted Syria's neighbouring countries on 12 June 2012, to request their cooperation in the framework of the 1970 Convention to prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural objects, notably by reinforcing borders controls.

On 7 May 2012, I seized the Chairperson of the Security Council and the UN Secretary-General to sensitize on the need to protect cultural heritage in the framework of the mission of the Joint Special Representative of the UN and Arab League Lakhdar Brahimi -- who underlined the gravity of the situation in his first briefing on Syria to the Security Council on 24 September 2012.

We have pursued further contacts with the Joint Special Representative, whom I met personally in New York on 27 September, 2012.

In November 2012, I decided to establish under UNESCO a Group of Coordination for Safeguarding the Cultural Heritage of Syria, composed of our partners, professional and international organizations, and that meets regularly to review the situation and plan concerted action.

On 10-13 February 2013, UNESCO organized in Amman, Jordan, a regional training workshop on the protection of Syrian cultural heritage, to elaborate and

endorse a strategy to mitigate the risks and consequences of illicit trafficking for Syrian cultural heritage.

This workshop brought together representatives from the Syrian Ministry of Culture, police and customs officers from Syria and neighbouring countries (Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon – to the exclusion only of Iraq), international experts specialized in the protection of cultural heritage, representatives of international organizations active in that domain (notably INTERPOL, World Customs Organization, International Council of Museums), archaeologists and representatives of the art market.

This initiative was conceived as a first facts-based assessment of the situation, to evaluate needs, and develop an action plan, for which funding is now being mobilized.

I have requested the Assistant Director-General Culture to create a dedicated webpage to bring all of these actions together and to provide Member States with regular updates.

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Notre travail en Syrie relève de notre responsabilité la plus haute, au titre des Conventions culturelles que l'UNESCO porte au nom de la communauté internationale :

- la Convention de 1954 pour la protection des biens culturels en cas de conflit armé et ses 2 Protocoles,
- la Convention de 1970 contre le trafic illicite des biens culturels
- la Convention de 1972 sur la protection du patrimoine mondial, culturel et naturel.

Et je rappelle que ces Conventions ont été ratifiées par la Syrie et par les pays voisins.

Le monde, Mesdames et Messieurs, nous regarde, à la recherche d'une solution durable.

Malgré la violence insoutenable, qui va bien au-delà de ce que les mots peuvent exprimer, je veux croire qu'une sortie de crise est possible.

J'exhorte tous les belligérants à cesser la violence, à respecter l'héritage des générations passées et l'intégrité des vies humaines.

Le Comité du patrimoine mondial lors de sa 37^e session au Cambodge examinera l'état de conservation des six sites syriens inscrits sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial - les villes historiques d'Alep, de Damas et de Bosra, le Crac des Chevaliers et Qal'at Salah El-Din, le site archéologique de Palmyre et les Villages antiques du Nord de la Syrie.

Notre travail relève aussi d'une obligation morale à protéger un patrimoine culturel exceptionnel, qui vaut pour toute l'humanité, au-delà des frontières de ce pays dévasté.

Comme l'a déclaré l'Ambassadeur et délégué permanent de la France, M. Daniel Rondeau, « *attaquer une culture, c'est attaquer un peuple, et l'humanité tout entière.* »

Ce patrimoine compte parmi les plus belles mosquées de toute la culture islamique, des lieux de rencontre et d'enseignement, de recherche et de paix.

Ce patrimoine porte le témoignage d'une culture millénaire, dont les sites, les monuments et les œuvres ont nourri dans le passé la rencontre des cultures et le dialogue des civilisations à travers l'histoire.

Ce patrimoine peut aussi, demain, contribuer à la réconciliation, à condition d'unir nos forces pour en protéger aujourd'hui les vestiges, et c'est pourquoi je vais continuer à travailler sans relâche pour la protection de ce patrimoine et de la culture de la Syrie.

Je vous remercie Madame la Présidente.