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Organización
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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 “Fighting the Looting of Syria’s
Cultural Heritage”**

Sofia, 16 September, 2015

H.E. Guro Katharina H. Vikør, Ambassador of Norway to Bulgaria,

Mrs. Roumiana Bachvarova, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior,

Mr. Vezhdi Rashidov, Minister of Culture,

H.E. Stavros Avgoustides, Ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus to Bulgaria,

Mr. Carsten Paludan-Müller, Director-General of NIKU, a longstanding partner of
UNESCO,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured to participate in this International Conference, here in Sofia,
with so many partners and friends committed to the protection of heritage.

I wish to thank the Bulgarian Government, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Sofia
and the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research for this timely initiative.

I would like to point out the proactive action of the Government of Bulgaria and its
strategic role in the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural objects.

Bulgaria is at the frontline of the implementation of the UNESCO 1970 Convention
against illicit trafficking, as an active member of its subsidiary committee and for the
invaluable contribution of Bulgaria to this global effort over the years.

Most recently, the State Agency for National Security of Bulgaria, in charge of the country's response to "international terrorism and extremism, as well as their financing" has included cultural objects in its working process organization.

This is a decisive step forward.

I stand before you with a deep sense of responsibility.

On 30 August, the Temple of Bêl in Palmyra was destroyed by explosives.

This first-century Temple embodied a unique fusion of the architectural styles of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman tradition.

It was a symbol of intercultural dialogue, it was a tangible evidence of the power of cultures to influence and enrich each other, and this is precisely what extremists seek to destroy.

The Temple of Bel, and the relics of Palmyra, are targeted, precisely because of what they represent – a vision of humanity united around its diversity, sharing heritage and a destiny.

This is a *war crime* and it is used as a *tactic of war*, to spread fear and hatred. Tim Whitmarsh, Professor at the University of Cambridge, put it eloquently in a recent article:

Syria's heritage is under attack from a toxic combination of religious absolutism, facile identity politics, postcolonial grievance, incendiary technology and adolescent folly.

We must stand up against this, to protect cultural heritage and combat illicit trafficking of cultural property.

This is UNESCO's absolute determination, bringing together all partners, with INTERPOL, ICOMOS, the World Custom Organizations, the museums, the art market, experts of the civil society and academia.

The world political community has raised a strong voice, with many resolutions at many levels, at UNESCO, at the UN general Assembly, at the European Parliament.

We all have a role to play, and we can all do something at our level. It is not true that we are doomed to see the heritage of humanity disappear.

Satellite images provided by our partners UNITAR-UNOSAT show archaeological sites in Syria riddled by thousands of holes... illegal excavations and mass looting are taking place on industrial scale.

This is part of a strategy of cultural cleansing, to destroy the past, present, and future of the unique heritage of a region known as the “cradle of human civilization”.

I see this as a call to action.

I was in Brussels yesterday, at the European Parliament - The European Union has just adopted new measures to reinforce the restitution of stolen artefacts within the Union, and is considering the adoption of a new regulation to control imports from abroad.

The European Union has already some strict regulations to control the exports of cultural goods, but I believe we can do more to strengthen the importation procedures.

At the international level, the ratification and implementation of UNESCO 1970 Convention is a first key step.

As I see here Mr Minister of Culture Vezhdi Rashidov, I remember we were together in Canada, in 2011, for the return to the Republic of Bulgaria of 21,000 coins, pieces of jewellery, and other objects that were illegally imported to Canada and seized by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

This was a strong symbol of international cooperation, and this is more important than ever to respond to this global threat on our common heritage.

Any State Party whose culture is in jeopardy may call upon other States Parties to participate in a concerted international effort to determine and carry out the necessary concrete measures, including the control of exports and imports and international commerce in the specific materials concerned.

Pending agreement, each State concerned shall take provisional measures, to the extent feasible, to prevent irremediable injury to the cultural heritage of the requesting State.

The Convention has been ratified by 129 countries, including Syria and many of its neighbours – we need universal ratification for it convention to be fully effective.

Combined with other instruments – from 1954, 1972, 2003, and 2005 – we have a strong legal basis to build on, and this is what UNESCO is doing, across the board.

This starts with work to build the capacity of Syrian stakeholders.

This includes a global social media campaign, #Unite4Heritage, I launched in Baghdad, to raise awareness and counter the narrative of violent extremism.

It involves a *Global Coalition for the Protection of Cultural Heritage*, launched at the World Heritage Committee meeting in Bonn in June.

It means leading implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199, a milestone to enhance protection of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria, extending to Syria the prohibition of trade of cultural objects in place for Iraq since 2003, alerting on the role of cultural heritage as a security imperative.

From all over the world, Member States are stepping up their efforts – UNESCO has received reports from over 30 States highlighting all the measures taken at the national level to implement resolution 2199 – including border control, coordination of services, training of police and custom officers.

I wish also to congratulate Norway for changes made to national legislation as a result of the United Nations' resolutions, as well as provisions based on EU

regulations concerning restrictive measures that prohibit the trade of Syrian cultural property.

The appeal of 17 March 2015 by Norwegian Minister of Culture, Ms Torhild Widvey, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Børge Brende, was important -- urging professional communities and the public to exercise caution and contribute to the prevention of the illegal trade in cultural artefacts.

Norway brings the same commitment to supporting UNESCO's action to safeguard the cultural heritage of Iraq, for which I am deeply grateful.

The Culture Ministers of Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden adopted on 12 May, a joint declaration calling for action to clamp down on the illegal trade of cultural objects from Iraq and Syria.

Within this Nordic Initiative, these Ministers will meet in Oslo on 3 December to strengthen action against illegal trade in cultural objects.

This is the leadership we need today, and I invite all Member States to follow this example, to ratify the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, to strengthen the means of the Private sector to combat this plague.

This Convention and the new European Union's 2014 Directive on the Return of Cultural Objects offer powerful tool so that the art market is no longer a tacit accomplice to the looting of culture.

We have an array of tools -- now, we find effective ways to implement them.

That is why this Conference is so important -- to share experience, identify strong and weak points, and elaborate strong guidelines for action, for States, museums and actors of the art market.

Expectations are high -- we must live up to them, and, together, I believe we can.

Thank you.