

Countering destruction and trafficking of cultural property - an Imperative for Humanity

NEW YORK- On 22 September, UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, participated in a High-Level Meeting on Protecting Cultural Heritage: An Imperative for Humanity, organized by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, Paolo Gentiloni, and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Jordan, Nasser Judeh, in the context of the 71st United Nations General Assembly, along with the Executive Director of UNODC, Yury Fedotov, was a partner, and Ms. Andriani, INTERPOL.

Irina Bokova made a first statement on behalf of the UN Secretary-General.

"Today I call on the international community to intensify the global response to attacks on cultural heritage," said the Secretary General, calling on all to unite4heritage.

The Jordanian Foreign Minister underlined the "power of culture as a source of strength, as a resource for resilience and hope for the future."

"We have to criminalize all those on all sides of the equation to stop illicit trafficking," said the Jordanian Foreign Minister, noting here the Declaration of Amman on culture property under threat adopted on 8 September as a regional achievement.

"Cultural heritage is a non-renewable energy in the region, and it is our common responsibility to defend," said Nasser Judeh, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Jordan.

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, Paolo Gentiloni, said "the loss of cultural heritage is a tremendous damage to our roots -- it is also a threat to pluralism."

"Terrorists want to wipe out the past and exacerbate tensions between local communities and the very idea of coexistence," he said.

The Italian Foreign Minister referred to the agreement with UNESCO and called on all to unite for heritage.

"Cultural heritage has moved to the frontline of conflicts, in Iraq, in Syria, in Yemen, in Mali," said the Director-General.

"In new conflicts, security issues, cultural issues, humanitarian issues, are deeply intertwined. None can be treated in isolation – sustainable action must come from joint action, from partnership. This is the spirit of this initiative."

A global initiative "Protecting Cultural Heritage—An Imperative for Humanity" was launched by the Permanent Delegations of Jordan and Italy, with strong support of UNESCO, INTERPOL and UNODC during the last year's General Assembly session, to enhance the protection of cultural heritage targeted by terrorists and illicit traffickers and to follow up on resolutions and decisions adopted by the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly and other international organisations.

This open-ended partnership has brought a number of recommendations, led a series of expert meetings and, above all, created a political platform to bridge the divide between protection of cultural heritage and diversity and protection of human life and human rights.

The side event saw interventions by Mr HE Daniel Mitov, Bulgaria Foreign Minister, HE Ioannis Kasoulides, Foreign Minister Cyprus, HE Istvan Mikola, Hungarian Minister of State for Security Policy, HE Mikheil Janelidze, Georgian Foreign Minister, HE Sultan AlShamsi, UAE Assistant Under-Secretary for International Cooperation, as well as Deputy Foreign Minister of Honduras Maria Andrea Matamoros Castillo, and Evan Ryan, US Assistant Secretary of State. Participants included also Jean-Paul Laborde, Director UN CTED and Karen Mosoti of the International Criminal Court.

Cooperation is deepening between UNESCO, INTERPOL and UNODC. A network of professionals to respond to illicit trafficking has been launched, ties with the art market have been enhanced and the awareness that deliberate

destruction of cultural heritage is a war crime that should be punished has been raised. ‘Blood antiquities’ have been seized in Finland, Jordan, Turkey, the United States, in the United Kingdom, Israel.

Up to now, more than 36 Member States have taken measures to strengthen legislation, harmonize services and improve cooperation with customs, law enforcement and cultural experts.

Advocating for strengthened legislation, the UNESCO Director-General appealed for “greater information sharing to fully implement UN Security Council Resolutions 2199 and 2253.”

The meeting resulted in renewed commitment of the international community to sharing responsibility and scaling up response to counter attacks against culture by combining the full range of “soft power” – heritage protection, education for human rights, safety of journalists in fight against radicalization.

UNESCO is working across the board to these ends. With the support of the European Union and the people of Mali, UNESCO has recovered hundreds of thousands of ancient manuscripts and rebuilt 14 mausoleums in Timbuktu, destroyed in 2012.

UNESCO is supporting the International Criminal Court to end impunity for such crimes, starting in Mali.

In closing, Irina Bokova reiterated her core message: “Culture is at the heart of new conflicts, so it must be at the heart of our strategy for peace”—a message that is deeply woven into UNESCO’s [#Unite4heritage](#) campaign.