

## INTERPOL Meeting on Cultural Property Looting in Iraq

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by [Ronald K. Noble](#), Secretary General of INTERPOL

Thank you, Mr. Attorney General.

Most of you have been here for two days and have heard several references to the important work of INTERPOL. Few of you outside the police community probably know exactly what we do and how we do it.

The International Criminal Police Organization's, INTERPOL's, core mission is the deceptively simple sounding task of providing the widest possible assistance among criminal police authorities around the world. No constitution binds us. What we do, we do on a voluntary basis. We have a system that uses "Notices" originally issued in paper format, but now issued in both paper and electronic format. These notices are sent and received by our National Central Bureaus (NCBs)- our lifeblood if you will. These Notices alert Member Countries, for example, about fugitives; about missing persons; about people whom the police are investigating. When a country receives an INTERPOL notice, it is free to act on INTERPOL's request from another Member Country to arrest that person or to not act on the request. This system of voluntary cooperation permits us to remain a diverse but highly functional organization.

A related function for our NCBs is to send requests and offers of assistance on police matters. Some 10,000 messages pass through our NCBs each month. This permits great cooperation on significant international crime. Besides alerting Member Countries about dangerous people or crimes, we develop specialized projects in drugs, terrorism, and sexual exploitation of children over the Internet. Our goals always focus on fostering international police cooperation while respecting the rule of law and human rights.

These ideals, which have existed since the founding of the Organization more than 80 years ago, are enormously difficult to achieve in practice. We have 181 member countries. Our Member Countries' police officers speak hundreds of different languages, though INTERPOL has 4 official languages (Arab, English, French and Spanish). We come from different cultures; we are trained in different legal systems; and we follow different police procedures. Even though we share a common profession, this degree of diversity can put serious obstacles in the way of the co-operation that we are supposed to foster.

Despite these impediments, INTERPOL succeeds time after time in achieving its goal. When the 11 September attacks occurred, we issued the first international notices on some of the leading figures in that attack at the request of the US, Egypt, Germany, the UK, Spain and Italy. Similarly, our working group meeting this week is a remarkable example of the ability of police services, professional experts and private concerns from around the world to set aside small concerns and to respond quickly to a crisis.

You, the participants in this conference, are responding to the call to restore a nation's treasured heritage. That ranks as a worthy objective.

It is astounding to recall that we first heard reports of the looting of cultural treasures in Baghdad only three short weeks ago. In that brief time, INTERPOL reacted quickly by sending personnel to assess the situation in Iraq, by making resources available on our Internet website, and by setting up this

multidisciplinary conference. The aim of this week's meeting is to define a comprehensive international strategy for identifying cultural treasures looted from Baghdad and returning them to their rightful homes.

Since 1947 INTERPOL has been working in the area of the recovery of stolen works of Art and Antiquities. Since the 70's we have published "INTERPOL's Most Wanted Works of Art" twice a year. And, we have had a surprisingly high success rate. Over the last 30 years we have recovered about 2 items per publication. We have recovered priceless works of art from Romania over 30 years from the time those thefts were publicized on our flyer. It is important that traders in stolen works of art or antiquity never be able to sleep comfortably thinking that INTERPOL has forgotten. INTERPOL never forgets, and INTERPOL will devote whatever time it takes to help recover stolen works of art and antiquity.

We currently have a database of 20,000 items. Although we have experts here in this area, one must remember that few police forces around the world have experts in this field; so our database must be very user friendly. INTERPOL has learned lessons about stolen works of art that are worth remembering today. I will touch upon a few of them now.

First, the quality of the police's effort to recover stolen works depends in large part on the quality of the information that we have about the cultural property in question. For example, following the first Gulf war, INTERPOL received inconsistent, incomplete and often inaccurate information about the cultural property allegedly stolen then. Iraq had no pictures to provide us, and despite a constant effort at improving the quality of information, we were able to enter only 1 reportedly stolen item in our database. It was a stone head of a woman, and it was recovered 2 years ago in the UK.

This working group must come up with a process for ensuring the accurate collection, storage and reporting of data concerning the looted property in Iraq. Right now we are operating on rumors and anecdotal stories. INTERPOL supports the roles of UNESCO and the International Council of Museums in helping to develop a database of what was supposed to be in Iraq; what actually was in the museums, libraries and archaeological sites and what is there now.

Second, INTERPOL's experience has been that stolen works of art and antiquity are generally recovered in the country from which they were stolen. This might sound counter-intuitive, but this has been our experience. So far, many of you gathered here today who are considered experts in this field believe that the same might be true with the reportedly looted cultural property from Iraq.

Third, INTERPOL deals most frequently with the National Central Bureaus of INTERPOL Member Countries. They are our mechanism for receiving and sending information. Unfortunately, in Iraq, there currently is no INTERPOL National Central Bureau. There is no national police force. Unless immediate steps are taken to re-create such a bureau, we will lose valuable opportunities for sharing of important information. Italy has offered to host a police operational meeting in this regard in Rome and since INTERPOL is being asked lead this effort in the area of international police cooperation, and I have invited the former Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police (Mick Palmer) to attend this working group in order to give us his guidance on this important issue.

Fourth, in working through the problem of recovering looted cultural property from Iraq, we should rely on experts from diverse backgrounds such as those gathered here today. INTERPOL has a contribution to make, and we will make a contribution. We have two of the world's foremost police experts in this area right here at INTERPOL Headquarters. Mr. Jean-Pierre Jouanny from the French National Police Force and Mr. Karl Heinz Kind from Germany's BKA. The commitment of these two individuals is so great that Mr. Jouanny came out of retirement to help us with our effort to recover looted Iraqi cultural property. INTERPOL plans to produce a special Most Wanted Works of Art Flyer for Looted Iraqi Cultural Property. We also plan to ask our National Central Bureaus and our Member Country police forces to designate police officers to form a Special International Task Force based in the Iraqi region. We will generate a Project Plan and give countries of the world an opportunity to contribute to a special fund designed to help police recover looted cultural property from Iraq and to help re-establish and connect to our global communication system, a new INTERPOL National Central Bureau in Iraq.

Finally, I close with a point that I know the Attorney General and all the experts in dealing with crises know. It is very common for the first information following a crisis to be wrong, and when I say wrong, I mean wrong. So, let us all try to be responsible in how we speak about this issue until we know the facts, and let us dedicate ourselves to gathering the facts as expeditiously and efficiently as possible.