

INTERPOL Meeting on Cultural Property Looting in Iraq

6 May 2003, Lyon, France

Prepared remarks

of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft

Note: The Attorney General often deviates from prepared remarks

Thank you, Ron, for that generous introduction. INTERPOL was already a top-flight law enforcement organization, but your dynamic leadership has brought new dimensions to this global crime-fighting resource.

I was pleased to have an opportunity to tour this wonderful facility this morning. Information is the best friend of preventing crime and preventing crime is the most important work which we can do.

Thank you for the invitation to join you here in Lyon. The Working Group on Theft of Cultural Property in Iraq will play a critical role in the months ahead in international efforts to return to the people of Iraq their national treasures.

All of us understand the importance of these cultural treasures to the Iraqi people.

Thank you, also, to those of you here from the private sector. We appreciate your cooperation and assistance in helping to return Iraq's heritage.

It is a pleasure for me to be here. INTERPOL fosters mutual assistance among all police authorities. It is a platform for raising awareness and identifying best practices of law enforcement worldwide.

INTERPOL is a forum for exchanging information on current criminal trends and investigations. This is especially important for trans-national crimes, or those that occur in the virtual world of the Internet: crimes such as child pornography and the trafficking of human beings. You have been on the forefront of successfully fighting both.

Let me take this opportunity, also, to express on behalf of the people of the United States, our profound appreciation for the work INTERPOL and its members have undertaken in the international war against terrorism.

I want to commend the Secretary General and INTERPOL for the presentation at the G8 yesterday. While I would not want to speak for all Justice Ministers, it seemed to me that there was deep respect for and a high degree of consensus on the work being done so well by INTERPOL.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, were focused on the United States of America. But we know that terrorists launched their attacks on the entire civilized world that day. INTERPOL's 181 member nations rightly saw the terrorist attacks for what they were and came to the defense of law and liberty.

The world changed that day. The way we fight terrorism changed that day. National, regional and local law enforcement agencies are cooperating, communicating and coordinating as never before.

Our new approaches are based on the shared belief that in order for a nation to prevent international terrorism inside its borders, it must work with its allies to defeat terrorism outside its borders.

INTERPOL's Fusion Task Force is a model for how national, regional and local law enforcement and intelligence organizations can share information to detect, disrupt and dismantle trans-national organized crime and terrorist organizations. You are helping us win the war against terrorism, and I salute the Fusion Task Force here.

Just as the United States depended on the alliance with INTERPOL in our time of need two years ago, I turn to your membership for assistance in another area of INTERPOL expertise: the reclamation of historic and cultural treasures looted from museums and government facilities in Iraq.

Since 1947, INTERPOL has been particularly involved in fighting the illicit trade in cultural objects. Simple international notices of stolen art have evolved into a highly efficient and detailed database system that circulates information to all INTERPOL member countries around the globe.

In response to reports in Iraq of looting in museums, INTERPOL quickly communicated with law enforcement agencies globally to be on the look-out for stolen Iraqi artifacts and valuable pieces of art.

The experience INTERPOL brings in database and communications management is a critical tool in our efforts to track and return artifacts. It will also help to create a world wide communications network for law enforcement and antiquities experts.

Already, the United States has taken steps in Iraq to recover what was stolen, and to account for what was sadly destroyed. Ambassador John Limbert, a senior advisor in the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs, is taking the lead in these crucial efforts.

Soon after hearing reports of the thefts that took place at the National Museum of Antiquities, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and U.S. Customs Service began to act:

They established an interagency law-enforcement working group to coordinate the U.S. response.

The FBI and U.S. Customs sent notices to their international attachés abroad, tasking them to focus on this issue and to ensure that liaisons were established with their foreign counterparts to elevate the capacity of our law enforcement agencies to intercept these cultural artifacts.

The FBI Legal Attaché in Paris met with attendees of the April 17th UNESCO conference on the theft of Iraqi artifacts.

The FBI and U.S. Customs attachés met with experts at the recent artifacts conference sponsored by the British Museum.

The FBI contacted museums and antiquities organizations in the U.S. to establish awareness of the theft investigations.

U.S. Customs agents already in Iraq have been reassigned to investigations at the Baghdad museum site. An FBI team that includes investigators with experience in antiquities will follow up that work.

From the evidence that has emerged, there is a strong case to be made that the looting and theft of the artifacts was perpetrated by organized criminal groups - criminals who knew precisely what they were looking for.

Although the criminals who committed the thefts may have transported the objects beyond Iraq's borders, they should know that they have not escaped the reach of justice for the pursuit of those responsible will be enhanced by the cooperative work of all of those in this room.

Regardless of how sophisticated these criminals are, or how hard they work to avoid detection, United States law enforcement and our colleagues at INTERPOL will not rest until the stolen Iraqi artifacts are returned to their rightful place - the public museums and libraries of Iraq.

The international coalition of Operation Iraqi Freedom fought to give citizens of that nation lives of liberty - free of tyranny and terror.

The coalition fought to give the Iraqi people back their heritage, not to have it snatched away in fits of retribution or greed.

The looted treasures and artifacts are touchstones of an artistic and intellectual tradition stretching back to the earliest recorded years of history.

Iraq is the cradle of civilization. It is where Eden bloomed, and great empires thrived. It is the birthplace of much religious history and written law.

Yet the operation under way to recover lost cultural, religious and historical artifacts is about more than taking back fragments of time and place. It is about more than restoring the past.

In a land where a generation of Iraqis did not know truth or beauty, their art and culture can give them some of both.

In the place where Hammurabi set down the first written code of law - but where Rule of Law has been woefully absent - the Iraqi people can see justice served as these treasures are returned. For those who have never witnessed it, justice done can reinvigorate hope; it can reinforce the opportunity for change.

In a region of unmatched historical heritage, the lands of Babylon and Nineveh will draw tourists, artists, scientists and businesses, all hallmarks of a free and open society.

It is our goal to return parts of the Iraqi people's past. In doing so we hope to return pieces of the Iraqi people's future.

The looting of Iraq's heritage is a violation of law. It is an affront to the dignity of the Iraqi people. It is an assault on the values of civilization-an assault on the values we all share.

Righting this wrong will be a challenge, but it is a task worthy of INTERPOL and its mission.

I thank you for your efforts, and for the successes you are sure to see in the future.