

INTERPOL international conference on stolen Iraqi art

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Mr Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentleman,

It is a great honour for me to represent here the Director General of [UNESCO](#), he asked me to convey to this meeting his greetings and his hope that we will really push you, the work that has been started since the disastrous looting of the Iraqi National Museum, and other museums as well. First of all I would like to thank Mr Deridder, the Executive Director of INTERPOL for inviting UNESCO to participate in this meeting and I would like to thank also his two colleagues who are very well known to UNESCO, Mr Kind and Mr Jouanny, because we are working with them since many years in the framework of the convention of 1970, and for example this handbook on the implementation of the 1970 convention was done in very close relation with INTERPOL. I would like also to remind the participants who are not familiar with the relationship between UNESCO and INTERPOL, that there is an agreement between these two institutions particularly on the subject that we are going to discuss today.

May I just quickly remind the story. I mean how this question of cultural heritage of Iraq was tackled by UNESCO since the beginning of the war in Iraq. First of all UNESCO used the experience of what has happened after the first Gulf War and the looting that happened in the regional museums in the North and in the South of Iraq. And we felt that this is a situation that may happen in Iraq also during this time, and therefore we already wrote to INTERPOL to ICOM, to the International Association of Art Dealers, explaining that there may be some chaotic situation which will allow for looting like it happened during the last war. And unfortunately, I mean we were not looking very much toward the future, but we were sure that in a situation of war there is always this kind of situation. And that's why when we saw on the television screens and through the news agencies that the looting started, first of all in some ministries and some public institutions, we were really afraid of what would happen to the Iraqi National Museum and we have seen as all of you, how this museum was looted. This was really considered as a catastrophe by all institutions and all museums in the world, and in UNESCO we received a large number of appeals saying UNESCO should do something about this looting. And therefore the Director-General Mr Matsuura decided to convene a meeting on the 17 April. You remember that the looting was happening on the 7 and 8 of April. So at just a very short notice we invited the most prominent scholars of the world who have worked in Iraq, who have experience in archaeology, mainly the chief of archaeological missions and some leading experts like the Director of the British Museum and the Director of the German Museum, to gather in Paris at UNESCO Headquarters on the 17 April and to have a kind of first assessment of the situation. We also invited some Iraqi scholars, very well known Iraqi scholars, from New York University, Columbia University, London University but also we tried, but we didn't succeed, to invite Professor Donigeorge who is the Iraqi Director of Archaeological research in the Department of Antiquities of Iraq. Our colleagues of the British Museum were more successful, ten days later, to bring Professor Donigeorge to London. This first meeting on the 17 April and this gathering was aimed at first make a first assessment through the knowledge received by the scholars, by their contacts with their partners in Iraq, by the main researchers and the aim was first to have this assessment and to make some kind of co-ordination of scientific networks for the cultural heritage of Iraq. The second aim was to formulate some strategic recommendations on this date in the era of the post-conflict situation in the view of rehabilitating the

cultural heritage of Iraq. Third, to establish the first plan of action determining the immediate action, the medium term and the long term, for the cultural heritage of Iraq. So this was the first action taken and immediately during this period we were in contact with the State Department, Mr Matsuura wrote to Mr Colin Powell and we were pleased to receive in Paris on exactly the same date Mrs Bonnie Gardiner who I see here and I would like to really congratulate her because she came immediately and we had very useful meetings on that day, on the 16 and 17 April. This meeting was able to give a clearer idea of what has happened and the main issue was the looting, and the main issue was how to take immediate measures to stop the objects getting out of Iraq. So my first action was of course to contact INTERPOL and I spoke to Mr Jouanny and we wrote a letter to your office and we also wrote a letter to all the surrounding countries, to the Minister of Culture because these are my partners, to the Ministers of Culture of the surrounding countries asking them to reinforce, through the Ministry of Interior, the search by the police and the customs at the borders. In addition of course we contacted again ICOM, the General Secretary of ICOM, Mr Brinkman, and also the International Association of Art Dealers, and we thought that there should be immediately some kind of preparation of a database. If we have knowledge about the objects missing, in order to stop, eventually, their arrival into the market. This was really the first action, the first immediate action taken on the 17 April after this meeting. Then we continued to be in contact with several institutions and in particular with the British Museum. In relation with Mr Neil MacGregor, the Director of the British Museum, we thought that another meeting should be useful, directed particularly toward the directors of museums. What we did in Paris was more a meeting open to all specialities - antiquities, Islamic period, archaeology, museology - all aspects were covered by this first meeting.

The meeting of London, organized by Neil MacGregor in co-operation with UNESCO on the 29 April, that means last week, was directed mainly towards the leading museums in the world, the major museums having collections of Iraqi cultural heritage. And there also I was of course present at this meeting, representing the Director-General of UNESCO, I made a statement on behalf of the Director-General of UNESCO, the statement of the Director-General of UNESCO was mainly a statement about the objects stolen and how to tackle this very important question of the objects stolen. The main characteristics of the meeting of London at the British Museum, was the fact that we had, for the first time since the end of the war, we had two presentations by colleagues who have been to Baghdad just a few days before the meeting. One from Professor Donigeorge, who explained to us, he is Iraqi, he was in the Museum, he was following all this period of uncertainty and also the unfortunate period of looting. So this was the first presentation at the British Museum, and the second one was the presentation by Mr John Curtis, the Curator of the Near Eastern Department, of the British Museum. This is the plus, if we compare it with the meeting of Paris. So the meeting of London was a meeting where we had finally more information and more technical details than what we had, all of us, through the media, through the television channels, who were reporting very well, like CNN, like BBC, the RAI. I mean, I saw personally these three channels and there were quite a lot of information you can take from the image which were shown on the screen. The two exposés by Professor Donigeorge and by John Curtis were concentrating of course on what has happened in the museum of Baghdad. Until now we don't have these technical data, informations about Mosul, in the museum of Mosul, or in other museums. And also, I am personally an archaeologist by training so I am very much concerned by what would have happened also in the archaeological sites. You know we have got some experience in UNESCO with the Afghan cultural heritage, and we have seen that even a long time after the end of the Taliban's regime, the looting and the illicit excavations continued in Afghanistan. And we have reports, particularly one report made by one of our Italian colleagues when he visited the minaret of Jaan after inscription of this minaret on the World Heritage List, we received a report showing that the whole hill behind the minaret of Jaan was like a, in French we say un gruyère, you know like this cheese with holes, and this was the result of illicit excavation going on at a very large scale. So our other concern is that, of course we should concentrate, and we are going to concentrate on what has happened in the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad, in the Mosul Museum, but also we should be also careful about what is probably happening in the archaeological sites of Iraq like Hatra, like Ur, Assur, etc.

Coming back to this meeting of London, I would like say that this first part of the meeting was very useful because we had presentation of exactly what kind of looters were going into this museum. You have seen probably all the various reports and it seems that there are two kinds of looters. There are the looters that we can consider people going in the streets, seeing no authority, and saying "it's good if we can take something" like they did in some Ministries, taking a chair or lamp or a computer. And this is probably one aspect of the looting. The other aspect, and now it's quite sure, is done by people who knew what they

were taking because Mr Donigeorge reported to us that there were some casts of the Stella of hamorabae casts of objects in the gallery of the museum. These casts were not taken. Were taken only objects, precious objects, and we have pictures of, for example, the Vase of Uruk. And we are all afraid because this is a fragile object, but it is a very original and very precious object. Then we had a very interesting discussion between the various directors of museums and experts in the field of museums and also in the presence of ICOM, in the presence of the representative of the Art Loss Register, and some members of the parliament present in this meeting. We all considered that it was absolutely useful now to start establishing a database. This is now becoming very important and the good news in this bad news is that the inventory of this museum was not burnt. It was confirmed by Mr Donigeorge, we were all afraid what happened to the inventory. Has the inventory disappeared? Has the inventory been, you know, scattered around, like we saw in the pictures, you know, all these fiches around on the floor. No. The inventory is there. Of course, the method now is to see through the various publications, scientific publications, of the archaeological missions, through the data which are still preserved in the museum, what is left and what is missing. So for example, our two colleagues who were in Baghdad, were not able to tell us what about the situation of the objects in the stores. They didn't have access because of electricity cut, they didn't have access into the store. Another very important question which was raised in Paris by some experts was about treasures which were put in the vaults of the Central Bank. What happens to these objects, we are not sure about the situation of these objects. Everybody knows that the Central Bank was attacked, that looters took money, but were they able to go into the vaults, were they able to take out from the vaults the collections that were put, since the first Gulf War, they were put in the safe at that time. So these are the informations that we were able to receive and to take into account and I think it is very important that the establishment of a database is really now constituting an important step.

The third phase in this very short time was the meeting I had in Paris with Mr Jouanny from INTERPOL, during which we discussed how to tackle this question of the database, and in which way we can really be efficient in working with the various institutions and bringing the information to INTERPOL. Here I want to tell you that I discussed with the Ambassador of Switzerland to UNESCO, Mr Feldmeyer, and he immediately reacted to my proposal that this is a very urgent matter: establishing the inventory, putting in place a database, organizing the relations with all the institutions which have the inventories, which have files, and trying to co-ordinate with INTERPOL, the transmission of the information. I am pleased to inform you that the Swiss Government has already allocated 250,000 Swiss francs for this particular operation. So this is, I think, a very good support that we were expecting if we have to go ahead. And in fact we have to go ahead, because one of the recommendations of the meeting in London was to ask UNESCO to co-ordinate between all the institutions the work of establishing a proper database. So these are the various stages of what we have been able to prepare since the beginning of the war in Iraq. Let me turn Mr President, to French, if you'll allow me,...

Je voudrais, Monsieur le Président, dire que cette réunion nous la considérons, à l'UNESCO, comme fondamentale parce qu'elle va permettre de définir maintenant de façon encore plus pratique quelles sont les actions que nos deux institutions en relation avec toutes les institutions qui sont spécialisées, qui sont nos partenaires habituels dans le domaine de la lutte contre le trafic illicite des œuvres d'art comment nous allons mettre en place maintenant le système d'inventaire et le moyen de récupérer les objets. Une des actions au plan politique que le Directeur général de l'UNESCO a lancé déjà, depuis quelques jours c'est de demander à Monsieur KOFI ANAN, le Secrétaire Général des Nations Unies, d'inscrire un point à l'ordre du jour du Conseil de sécurité de façon à ce qu'une résolution soit prise au niveau international par tous les Etats pour bloquer, pour empêcher l'importation d'objets en provenance d'Iraq. Vous savez tous que la Convention de 1970 est ratifiée par 97 Etats partie. Alors bien sûr, et c'était l'une des discussions que nous avons eu avec Madame Bonnie Magness-Gardiner il y a quelques jours les Etats-Unis sont parties de la Convention de 1970, la Grande-Bretagne est Etat partie de la Convention de 1970, la France est Etat partie de la Convention de 1970, mais il y a beaucoup de pays qui ne sont pas Etat partie de la Convention de 1970 et c'est la raison pour laquelle nous avons pensé que même si c'est pour une période temporaire, une décision qui est prise à l'échelon de tous les Etats, même ceux qui ne sont pas signataires de la Convention de 1970, permettrait de lutter plus efficacement contre l'importation d'objets en provenance d'Iraq. Donc ça c'est sur le plan politique.

Sur le plan technique maintenant, nous avons proposé aux autorités américaines et aux autorités anglaises, de constituer très rapidement une mission pluridisciplinaire qui puisse se rendre en Iraq et qui

puisse faire un premier inventaire, un premier état des lieux pour le musée bien sûr de Bagdad, mais aussi pour d'autres sites de façon à pouvoir préparer un plan d'action pour la réhabilitation du patrimoine iraquien. J'ai eu la chance d'en parler directement le 29 avril avec le Professeur Denis GEORGES qui a accueilli cette idée avec beaucoup d'enthousiasme qu'il a dit pendant sa conférence de presse et là nous sommes en train de discuter les derniers aspects logistiques qui nous permettraient de nous rendre en Iraq, le Directeur général m'a chargé d'ailleurs de conduire cette mission pluridisciplinaire qui comprendra des archéologues, des architectes, des muséologues, de façon à couvrir tous les champs concernant le patrimoine Iraquien. Aujourd'hui, notre réunion devrait donc se concentrer sur ce que nous savons, c'est-à-dire sur les informations reçues à ce jour concernant le musée de Bagdad, concernant le musée de Mosul mais nous n'avons pas plus de détails. Cette réunion devrait nous permettre de renforcer la coopération internationale, je vois ici beaucoup de personnes que je connais, avec lesquelles nous avons déjà travaillé. Donc premièrement renforcer la coopération internationale et la coopération avec la police. Si la presse est déjà la presse en a parler, j'ai été interviewé hier soir par la BBC, ce matin j'ai écouté une radio parisienne qui parlait de cette réunion, si la presse sait qu'il y a un effort qui se fait à l'échelon international, je pense que c'est déjà une première étape qui va freiner les trafiquants qui seront que malgré tous il y a maintenant une action qui est prise à l'échelon international et qu'il y a une coopération entre les différentes institutions. Deuxièmement, il faut pour pouvoir certifier que les objets sont volés, s'assurer qu'ils sont effectivement venus des dépôts et des galeries du musée, alors nous avons été assurés jusqu'à maintenant par Monsieur Denis GEORGES que tous les objets avaient un numéro d'inventaire et qu'ils étaient enregistrés dans leur catalogue général du musée. Nous avons même eu des personnes privées en France qui nous ont écrit en disant : " Nous avons acheté un catalogue du musée de Bagdad, nous le mettons à votre disposition ". C'est une action qui montre que toute la sensibilisation que nous avons faite depuis quelques semaines est en train de porter ses fruits et il y a vraiment des volontés même de personnes privées pour essayer de lutter contre ce vol d'objets. Nous devons donc assurer maintenant que les données soient rassemblées, collectées, selon un format qui doit être élaboré ici, puisqu'il doit être compatible et capable d'être passé avec facilité à la base de données d'INTERPOL. Pour cela nous pensons que le système d'INTERPOL qui existe déjà, qui est fait sur la base du idea object, nous devons le maintenir et nous devons travailler dans le cadre de ce système. Mais il faut aussi se poser la question ici et voir de quelles manières protéger l'information, car il ne s'agit pas de mettre cette information sur le site et la distribuer sans une surveillance et une manière de contrôler ces informations et savoir vers quels destinataires elles vont être envoyées. Enfin, assurer le suivi de cette opération, ça veut dire organiser de temps à autre des rencontres qui nous permettrons de savoir où est-ce qu'on en est et qu'elles sont les résultats déjà obtenus. Je dois dire que selon deux ambassadeurs que j'ai rencontrés la semaine dernière à Paris, l'ambassadrice de Jordanie auprès de l'UNESCO et l'ambassadeur de Turquie auprès de l'UNESCO. L'ambassadrice de Jordanie m'a dit que des instructions très fermes avaient été données à la police aux frontières en Jordanie et que déjà certains objets ont été récupérés. Donc cela veut dire que quelque part le système commence à fonctionner et que la police jordanienne est en train de faire un travail de recherche dans les bagages qui sortent de l'Iraq. Pour la Turquie, j'ai obtenu l'assurance, il y a trois jours de l'ambassadeur de Turquie qui m'a rapporté une réponse du ministre de la Culture à qui j'avais écrit le 17 avril, me disant que des instructions avaient été données effectivement aux postes frontières avec l'Iraq en Turquie et que des recherches allaient être suivies et entreprises. Donc il va falloir assurer un suivi de toutes ces opérations et voir quels sont les résultats que nous allons obtenir de cette manière. J'ai pu voir comme vous tous que les autorités américaines avaient saisi aussi aux frontières à l'arrivée à Washington et à Boston, bon il ne s'agissait pas d'objets archéologiques, il s'agissait de peintures d'objets contemporains qui avaient été pris dans les palais de Sadam HUSSEIN mais c'est déjà aussi un exemple de résultat qui montre que les instructions ont été données aux polices et aux services des douanes pour empêcher l'importation de ces objets d'arts. Voilà Monsieur le Président ce que je voulais dire en guise d'introduction à votre séminaire, je crois que ce séminaire s'inscrit dans la vision que l'ensemble de la communauté internationale a actuellement pris en compte ; dans le train une de mes collègues archéologues qui est italienne et qui a travaillé en Iraq m'a remis cette revue qui s'appelle " Archéo Iraq " (texte arabe : la civilisation qui part en morceau) et je voudrais vous lire juste un paragraphe qui montre bien l'importance et l'intérêt de ce travail que nous tous nous devons faire : je le lis rapidement en Italien :

La guerre qui vient de se terminer, a eu des effets désastreux pour le patrimoine archéologique de ce pays et aussi pour un des musées les plus importants du monde aujourd'hui endommagé pour les sites archéologiques connus et les sites non connus. A tout cela s'ajoutent les milliers d'œuvres qui ont été

volées et qui sont destinées au marché clandestin international. Il est vrai aujourd'hui nous sommes tous plus pauvres parce que nous avons été privés de notre histoire et de notre mémoire.

Merci Monsieur le Président.