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## Risks to World Heritage sites reveal need for greater protection – top UN official



UNESCO Director-General Irina Bukova addresses World Heritage Committee meeting

26 July 2010 – With internationally renowned cultural and natural sites inscribed on the United Nations World Heritage List at risk from threats ranging from climate change to urbanization, a top official with the world body has emphasized the importance of their protection.

Recent disasters such as earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, floods in Poland, fires in Uganda and landslides in Peru have spotlighted the need for the expertise of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) in helping to safeguard heritage, the agency's Director-General told the opening of the latest meeting of the [World Heritage Committee](#).

"Damage to culture also wounds the human spirit," Irina Bokova said yesterday in Brasilia, Brazil.

She pointed to the example of Haiti, where the massive earthquake in January caused extensive damage to the city of Jacmel, which was founded in the late 17th century and is on the country's tentative list of sites to be put forward for consideration for inscription on the [World Heritage List](#).

Also severely damaged in the disaster were much of Haiti's cultural infrastructure in Port-au-Prince, including the Cathedral, the National Palace and the Palace of Justice.

UNESCO, Ms. Bokova said, has “acted rapidly to assess the damage and assist Haitian authorities in safeguarding their heritage.”

Earlier this month, the UNESCO-backed International Coordination Committee (ICC), chaired by Haiti’s Minister of Culture Marie-Laurence Jocelyn-Lasseque, held its first meeting to identify priorities for the reconstruction of buildings, natural sites and damaged historic urban centres.

“This is what the world community expects of UNESCO: first-class, impartial technical knowledge and advice in all situations,” Ms. Bokova stressed yesterday.

The World Heritage Committee is meeting in the Brazilian capital to consider 39 possible new sites – eight natural, 29 cultural and two mixed – from 33 countries for inclusion on the World Heritage List. Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Tajikistan have put forward nominations for the first time.

World Heritage sites, Ms. Bokova said, “are chosen because they have outstanding universal value. We have the responsibility to also ensure that they are symbols of dialogue, peace and reconciliation.”

Currently, the World Heritage List recognizes 890 properties in 148 countries to be of “outstanding universal value.”

Yesterday, the UNESCO head drew attention to the Committee’s ability to “blaze new trails,” emphasizing that sites can be “testing grounds for innovative protective measures that closely involve communities.”

During its meeting, which is set to wrap up on 3 August, the Committee – comprising representatives from 21 of the States Parties to the [World Heritage Convention](#) – will also review the state of conservation of 147 World Heritage properties, including 31 sites inscribed on the list of sites in danger.

That list features properties threatened by problems including pollution, urban development, poorly managed mass tourism, wars and natural disasters.

The Committee will also look into a further 36 sites causing serious concern.

Last year, UNESCO removed Germany’s [Dresden Elbe Valley](#) from its World Heritage List due to the building of a four-lane bridge in the heart of the cultural landscape, as well as the [Arabian Oryx Sanctuary](#) in Oman, de-listed for the country’s failure to fulfil its conservation obligations for the site.

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