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UNESCO chief reaffirms commitment to protect Haiti's cultural heritage



UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova (second right) visits remains of Quisqueya University in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

10 March 2010 – Kicking off a visit to Haiti today, the head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) today reiterated the agency's support to help the nation protect its cultural heritage – including works of art and libraries – in the wake of January's catastrophic earthquake.

"I have come to express UNESCO's solidarity with Haiti," [said](#) Director-General Irina Bokova at the start of a two-day visit to the impoverished Caribbean nation, adding she hopes to see first-hand how the agency can best assist authorities "at this crucial time for the Haitian people."

With many Haitian artefacts under threat of looting, vandalism and illicit trafficking, UNESCO has helped set up an International Coordination Committee (CIC) for Haitian culture, led by the country's Government.

Ms. Bokova is scheduled today to visit Jacmel, in the southeast, which was founded in the late 17th century and suffered extensive damage during the 7.0-magnitude quake that struck Haiti on 12 January.

Jacmel, many of whose historical structures collapsed in the disaster, is on Haiti's tentative list of sites to be put forward for consideration for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

Earlier in the day, the UNESCO chief met with Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive, Education Minister Joel Desrosiers Jean-Pierre and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

She also stopped at CECOSIDA, a national communications centre seeking to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, which has been providing psychological and post-traumatic support to journalists, with UNESCO's assistance.

"In the aftermath of the disaster, the media have a key role to play in rebuilding the nation," Ms. Bokova emphasized.

On education, she reiterated UNESCO's goal to help the Government re-establish the school system in the short-term, as well as to tackle issues at all levels of schooling, from primary school to university. The agency also aims to increase the number of children in schools nationwide and to stem the so-called 'brain drain.'

Later this month, UNESCO is holding a forum in Paris on rebuilding Haiti's "social, cultural and intellectual fabric," which will be attended by Mr. Bellerive. The gathering will bring together Haitian intellectuals, artists and decision-makers, along with experts from around the globe, to define the country's short-, medium- and long-term reconstruction goals.

Yesterday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon led UN staff and the family and friends of personnel who perished in the earthquake in honouring the memory of the 101 men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of the Organization.

"Today, we commemorate the single greatest loss the UN has suffered in its history," a visibly shaken Mr. Ban **stated** during the memorial ceremony held at UN Headquarters in New York.

The quake affected one third of Haiti's 9-million strong population and brought down the Christopher Hotel, which houses the UN headquarters in Port-au-Prince, and other buildings hosting the world body's offices.

"We remember 101 lives of consequence," Mr. Ban told the gathering, which was also attended by senior officials, representatives of Member States, and colleagues from the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (**MINUSTAH**).

The Secretary-General's Special Representative to Haiti and head of MINUSTAH, Hédi Annabi, his Deputy Luiz Carlos da Costa and Acting Police Commissioner Doug Coates were among those that were killed.

"We honour 101 unique paths that joined in Haiti to write the larger story of the United Nations," he said of the diplomats, humanitarians, doctors, drivers, police officers, soldiers and various other professionals who died on 12 January.

Though they came to Haiti from all corners of the world, from all walks of life, they had one thing in common, noted the Secretary-General. "They shared a common conviction... a belief in a better future for the people of Haiti, and a common resolve to help them build it.

“And as they fulfilled their mission in Haiti, they illuminated a profound truth – earthquakes are a force of nature, but people move the world.”

Also yesterday, the top UN official in Haiti told reporters in New York that nearly two months after the earthquake, the country is moving towards recovery but will need continued urgent humanitarian relief for at least the next 12 months.

“That first phase of humanitarian aid and assistance will have to be there in a parallel track with the other two – recovery and reconstruction – because the rainy season is already arriving and we will have the hurricane season in June,” said Edmond Mulet, Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General for MINUSTAH.

Emergency shelter, site management, sanitation and food continue to be the main priorities in Haiti, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)). To date, emergency shelter material has reached nearly 525,000 people, or 41 per cent of those in need.

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