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UN NEWS CENTRE



UNESCO voices concern at proposed auction of Indonesian artefacts



Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO

5 May 2010 – The United Nations agency entrusted with preserving the world’s cultural heritage today stressed the importance of keeping cultural items available for scientific study and public enjoyment, voicing concern at the proposed auction of hundreds of thousands of artefacts from a 1,000-year-old Indonesian shipwreck.

“It would be unfortunate to allow heritage of such historical and archaeological value to be scattered, thereby depriving both scientists and the general public of access to an exceptional collection,” UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) Director-General Irina Bokova said of the proposed sale of 270,000 artefacts from the 10th-century ship off the coast of Java.

A Government auction of the artefacts, which include Chinese ceramics, religious objects, jewellery, gold coins, pottery, was set for today but was postponed for lack of buyers.

“Exploiting an archaeological site and dispersing its artefacts is an irreversible process. Yet the contents of the shipwreck found off the coast of the city of Cirebon have much to tell us about cultural and commercial exchanges in the region at that time,” Ms. Bokova added, noting that UNESCO’s Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage urges States to safeguard sunken heritage and make it available for scientific study and public enjoyment.

“We therefore encourage the Indonesian Government to make every effort to ensure that thorough scientific examination of the site is carried out and the

artefacts are presented in museums.” She pledged UNESCO’s readiness to lend its conservation expertise to the Indonesian authorities.

The ship, located by a private exploration company in 2004 off the coast of Cirebon in northern Java, is thought to have foundered as it arrived from the neighbouring island of Sumatra. In 2007, UNESCO experts visited the site where the finds are stored, underlining their historical importance and the need to conserve them in suitable conditions. They offered to help the Government preserve the artefacts, which are particularly fragile when brought out of water.

Also today Ms. Bokova welcomed France’s decision to return 16 mummified and tattooed Maori heads to New Zealand. “UNESCO has always advocated total respect for human remains and supported their restitution,” she said.

According to Maori tradition, preserving the heads of ancestors contributes to keeping their spirit alive. The heads, which have been in French museums since the 19th century, will be returned to New Zealand following a bill approved by the French National Assembly.

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