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UN official calls for concerted effort to safeguard cultural heritage in North Africa



UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova

16 March 2011 – The head of the United Nations agency tasked with preserving the world’s cultural heritage has urged the body’s partner organisations to join its efforts to safeguard cultural heritage in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the three North African countries rocked by civil unrest recently.

“I have been deeply moved and very proud of the reaction by the citizens of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya – young and old alike – to protect their heritage during a time of uncertainty and change that too often spilled over into violence,” [said](#) Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)).

“Nonetheless, we are alarmed by reports of destruction, damage and theft at museums, archaeological sites and libraries and deeply concerned that this period of social upheaval will leave cultural heritage vulnerable to those unscrupulous few who would profit from the situation,” said Ms. Bokova at an emergency meeting of experts on cultural property at UNESCO headquarters in Paris late yesterday.

She said UNESCO and its partners stood by all those defending their heritage and pledged to rally expertise to help them succeed.

“To start with, expert missions will travel to Egypt and Tunisia in the coming days to make contact with the newly appointed personnel of the ministries of culture, assess the need for assistance, especially in the area of prevention of illicit trafficking, and to devise a comprehensive UNESCO Action Plan on the medium and long-term protection of cultural heritage.

“We must work especially closely with young people to spread the message that the cultural heritage of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya is their heritage, intimately linked to their identity and also a potentially powerful agent of democracy and intercultural understanding – a message that they are clearly ready to hear and act upon,” said Ms. Bokova.

The Director-General’s comments were unanimously supported by participants at the meeting, including representatives from the World Customs Organization, Interpol, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the World Monuments Fund and several individual experts.

The organizations and experts work closely with UNESCO on cultural heritage. They earlier attended the opening day of a conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of UNESCO’s Convention for the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property.

Reviewing the situation for cultural heritage in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, they voiced concern over the lack of reliable information about the status of cultural heritage sites and institutions, the loss of previously established working relations with key institutions and individuals, the threat of neglect of heritage protection brought about by social and economic emergencies, and the constantly changing conditions.

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