

Speech: “Civilization, education, and our shared cultural heritage will prevail over destruction, barbarism, and the division of terrorists”

Thank you Mr President.

Thank you also to our briefers, and to the Secretary-General for his report. This provided a comprehensive summary of the actions many of us have taken to protect cultural heritage sites since the adoption of Resolution 2347 and, perhaps more importantly, of what more we can all do to prevent any further destruction.

In recent years with the explosion of conflicts across much of the Middle East and Africa, terrorists have not only endeavoured to destroy the ways in which we choose to live today, but also our heritage and the records of how humanity existed in the past. This attempt to annihilate cultures that are not their own, whether through genocide, ethnic cleansing, or war crimes, all too often goes hand in hand with the destruction of cultural heritage and identity.

As we have seen in Palmyra, in Nimrud, in Timbuktu, these brutal groups do not limit themselves in demolition, but also profit in trading artefacts that should belong to all, and not to selfish individuals. With this trade, they fund more of their activities, be it attempts to expand their territories, inflict terror abroad or disperse their propaganda.

That is why we particularly welcome the International Criminal Court’s sentencing of an individual for directing attacks against religious and historic buildings in Timbuktu, as discussed in the Secretary General’s report. We encourage the Court to prosecute all individuals who contribute towards this crime, to serve as a deterrent to those who may be inclined to similar actions in the future.

We also welcome the education and awareness-raising projects listed in the Secretary-General’s report, and I would like to commend Italy for their leadership on cultural protection. In addition to unified international action through legal and judicial instruments, this kind of practical action is essential to support those countries most at risk.

May I join others in congratulating Ms. Audrey Azoulay on her election as Director-General of UNESCO, and in welcoming her today.

We believe that UNESCO has a meaningful role to play in this arena. We encourage the new Director-General to review UNESCO activity with a view to focusing resources on programmes and projects which will have the greatest impact and demonstrable value for money.

To secure progress, public funding needs to be matched by investment from philanthropists and the private sector. I commend those trusts and foundations that are already supporting work in this area. We need more organisations to follow their lead and work in partnership with national governments, multilateral agencies, and civil society to protect our shared heritage for the benefit of humanity.

May I take a few moments to discuss the UK's national actions in this area.

Since the adoption of Resolution 2347 we have ratified the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, and acceded to both of its Protocols. This demonstrates the importance we place on responding forcefully to the destruction of cultural heritage by terrorists, looters and other maligned forces.

Our enforcement agencies are continuing their efforts to prevent illicit artefacts entering or leaving the United Kingdom. Considering the size of the antiques market, we hope this will have a significant impact.

And we have established a Cultural Protection Fund, initially of \$40 million, which is already helping to protect and conserve heritage at risk in conflict areas, and providing the skills and expertise which are sorely needed to ensure that our shared heritage is saved for future generations.

This will also play an important role in post-conflict situations, and support reconciliation between communities and nations. We know that heritage sites which receive proper protection can produce economic as well as social benefits, for example, through sustainable tourism.

Our Cultural Protection Fund is already supporting projects in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, and Turkey. But we are keen to support other projects across the Middle East and North Africa. So we are exploring the scope to extend the programme to other regions where cultural heritage is at risk.

Mr President, as the Secretary-General's report makes clear, World Heritage Sites and other iconic monuments and artefacts have been subjected to wilful destruction. We should and must do all we can to prevent a recurrence of such acts. Civilization, education, and our shared cultural heritage will prevail over destruction, barbarism, and the division of terrorists.

Thank you.