

# The International Committee of the Blue Shield 1998–2004: an Overview

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## INTRODUCTION

Members of the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) believe that it should eventually become the cultural equivalent of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); an ambitious aim for a voluntary organization with no funds of its own. But some progress has been made since its inception in 1996.

Confronted by the terrible images of death and injury of people caused by war, terrorism and natural and man-made disasters delivered daily by the media, many people question why we should

be so concerned, for example, about the destruction and damage to the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, the looting of the National Library and Archives in Baghdad, or the fourteenth-century mosque in Mestassa, Morocco, damaged by an earthquake. The movable and immovable records of human civilizations: archives, books, manuscripts, artefacts of all kinds, historic sites and the structures which house them, are more than the cultural property of the particular civilizations they record and their successors. Individually they help to define a people and a culture. They confer an identity to individuals and groups. But together they are the common

inheritance of all humanity. With other aspects of culture such as languages, customs and beliefs, music and costume, they distinguish civilization from mere existence.

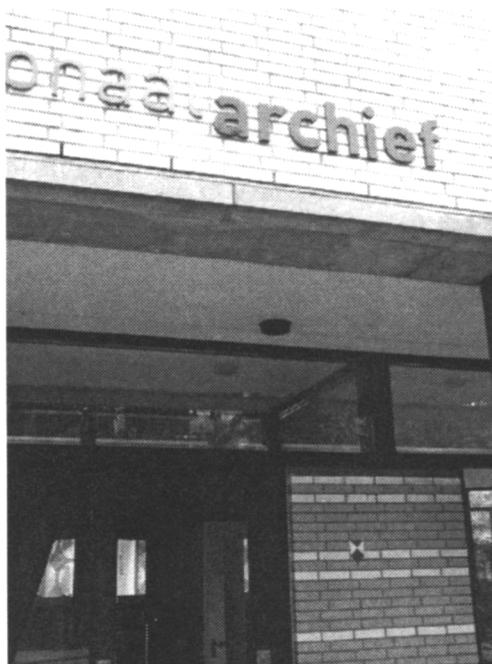
Surely we need cultural heritage to survive down the centuries so that we can anchor ourselves both in the past and in the present? The objects that form this heritage need protection from disasters – those brought on by people (war, conflict, terrorism), by nature (floods, earthquakes and the local environment) and accident (fire and other disaster). They also need protection from neglect, such as lack of investment in staff, equipment and maintenance, as well as from development.

There are many ways in which this protection can be, and is, attempted. They range from local voluntary effort to international legal frameworks. One such provision is the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS). The ICBS was formed in 1996 by four international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) active in the field of cultural heritage: the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). It takes the name 'Blue Shield' from the symbol of The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954 ([http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/hague/html\\_eng/page1.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/hague/html_eng/page1.shtml)).

ICBS was set up to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by wars and natural disasters by coordinating preparations to meet and respond to emergency situations.

## **OBJECTIVES**

Working closely with the United Nations agency with responsibility for culture, UNESCO, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), ICBS brings together the knowledge, experience and international networks of its constituents. Its objectives include:



**Blue Shield, Het Nationaal Archief, The Hague**

- 'to facilitate international responses to emergencies threatening cultural property
- to encourage the safeguarding and respect for cultural property, especially by promoting risk preparedness
- to train experts at national and regional level to prevent, control and recover from disasters
- to act in an advisory capacity for the protection of endangered cultural heritage' (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/protect.htm>).

It attempts to achieve these objectives by:

- 'collecting and sharing information on threats to cultural property world-wide
- raising public awareness about damage to cultural heritage
- promoting good standards of risk management among those responsible for cultural heritage at all levels, from institutions to national governments
- working to make decision makers and professional staff aware of the need to develop prevention preparedness, response and recovery measures

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- providing professional expertise to help meet emergencies
- identifying resources for disaster prevention and for rapid intervention in emergencies
- encouraging the establishment of national Blue Shield committees' (<http://www.ifla.org/VI4/admin/protect.htm>).

### THE RADENCI DECLARATION

An early initiative of the ICBS was The Radenci Declaration, the outcome of a seminar held in Radenci, Slovenia, in November 1998, with the preparation and support of UNESCO. In addition to representatives of the founding organizations, delegates from cultural organizations of Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden took part. The participants agreed on the following principles:

1. 'Cultural heritage embraces both movable and immovable property. Its loss is a concern to all and its protection, safeguard and respect – in normal and exceptional situations – must be included in policies and programmes at international, national, regional and local levels.
2. All institutions caring for cultural heritage and all authorities responsible for it should integrate risk preparedness and management within their operations to avoid loss or damage in both normal and exceptional times.
3. The goal is to avoid loss or damage to cultural heritage in the event of emergencies by improving prevention, preparedness, response and recovery measures.
4. With regard to the particular case of armed conflicts, the participants recognised the value of basic principles of safeguard and respect for cultural heritage as embodied in The Hague Convention of 1954 and other conventions for the protection of cultural heritage adopted under the auspices of UNESCO, including precautionary measures such as the preparation of inventories, development and implementation of appropriate technical measures and the adoption of national legislation and policies.'

In conclusion, the participants resolved to 'continue to share experiences and to cooperate in the context of the ICBS to develop national, regional and local initiatives to avoid loss of cultural heritage' ([http://www.unesco.org/webworld/highlights/radency\\_290399.html](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/highlights/radency_290399.html)).

### THE STRASBOURG CHARTER

Meeting in Strasbourg in April 2000, ICBS adopted a charter, formally establishing its aims and objectives. The Charter stated that:

In order to protect endangered cultural heritage, the International Committee of the Blue Shield has been created in 1996 by the four non-governmental organisations, which represent professionals active in the fields of archives, libraries, monuments and sites, and museums.

In the framework of the Hague Convention (1954) for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict, ICA (International Council on Archives), ICOM (International Council of Museums), ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) have taken up the emblem of the Convention as symbol of the International Committee of the Blue Shield.

The four organisations have decided to work together to prepare for, and respond to, emergency situations in case of armed conflict or natural disaster that could affect cultural heritage. They respect the following principles:

- joint actions
- independence
- neutrality
- professionalism
- respect of cultural identity
- work on a not-for-profit basis (<http://www.ifla.org/VI4/admin/nc-req.htm>).

### THE SECOND PROTOCOL TO THE HAGUE CONVENTION

Meanwhile, in 1999, the long-awaited Second Protocol to The Hague Convention ([http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/hague/html\\_eng/protoco](http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/hague/html_eng/protoco)

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12.shtml) was adopted at a diplomatic conference in The Hague. According to Patrick Boylan, head of the non-governmental delegation at the conference, the new protocol represented 'much the greatest advance in international cultural protection measures for decades – certainly since the World Heritage Convention, and probably since the original 1954 Hague Convention' (<http://whc.unesco.org/news/1611.htm>).

The Second Protocol restricts the ability of warring parties to attack cultural property. It emphasizes the need for peacetime preparation to safeguard sites and for training of armed forces in the need to avoid attacking cultural property. In particular it makes specific provisions for the responsibilities of occupying powers in relation to the territories they occupy. For example, it restricts archaeological excavations and the change of use of cultural institutions. It also requires an occupying power to prohibit and prevent all illicit export, removal or change of ownership of cultural property. All these provisions are interesting when considered in relation to recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Second Protocol created a new category of 'Exceptional Protection' for the most important institutions, monuments and sites to be designated and publicized in advance, rather like World Heritage Sites. The circumstances in which a combatant may attack such a site are strictly limited to situations where the enemy uses it in direct support of their operations and even then there must be no reasonable alternative and the response must be proportionate and limited.

Arguably the most significant advance contained in the Second Protocol is the establishment of new crimes of breaching cultural property protection in relation not only to the provisions of the Second Protocol itself, but also the original 1954 convention and other provisions. Although it is expected that such crimes will be dealt with by the military or civilian courts of the country of those accused, there is also provision for international jurisdiction as well as for extradition for the most serious of the new crimes.

But for the ICBS itself there is a provision of

even greater significance in the new Protocol. For the first time there are institutional arrangements to facilitate the application of The Hague Convention. There will, for example, be biennial meetings of the States Parties (those states which have ratified or acceded to the Convention). The States will elect a 12 member Committee for the Protection of Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which will meet at least once a year and more frequently in cases of emergency. The Committee will have a duty to promote the provisions of the convention and to monitor its observance. It will consider applications for exceptional protection, referred to above and for financial assistance from a fund established under the Protocol. Unfortunately the fund will be made up of voluntary contributions. But, significantly, ICBS and its constituent members, together with ICCROM and ICRC will have important standing advisory roles in relation to the Committee and its work. They are recognized by name in the Protocol and will be consulted, for example, on applications from States for exceptional protection status for particular collections, institutions, monuments and sites.

The new Protocol encourages States to raise awareness among the general public and within education systems where the state directly influences the curriculum about the need for protection of cultural heritage. One desirable provision which did not get through to the final text was a proposal to give a right of recognition and protection to Blue Shield representatives and professionals involved in cultural protection. This was disappointing, but the outcome of the diplomatic conference represented a major advance in provisions for the protection of cultural property in the midst of armed conflict and a notable development in the recognition of the value of the International Committee of the Blue Shield.

However, the adoption of a new Protocol is one thing, ensuring that it comes into force is quite another. This requires ratification or accession by a minimum of twenty states. That was finally achieved in March 2004, following the accession of Costa Rica to the Protocol. The other nineteen states which had ratified or acceded at that

point were: Argentina, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Cyprus, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Honduras, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Lithuania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Qatar, Serbia and Montenegro, and Spain. This compares with the 108 States Parties to The Hague Convention itself and the 87 which have ratified or acceded to the first Protocol. It will be noted that there are several significant absentees from this list of twenty. However, in many countries accession or ratification requires primary legislation which is undoubtedly difficult to achieve in busy parliamentary schedules.

### THE ICBS AT WORK

The ICBS is a relatively informal body meeting about four times a year usually in Paris. Each of the founding partners takes it in turn to host the meeting. They are each represented by one or two people, often the Secretary General of the organization accompanied by an elected official or a specialist staff member. Until recently the host organization provided the chair, but in 2003, in order to achieve greater continuity, the author, then Secretary General of IFLA, was elected president for a period of one year. On completion of his term of office, Joan van Albada, Secretary General of ICA was elected to succeed him and the term of office was extended to two years. In an earlier attempt to improve coordination and continuity, the secretary of the National Blue Shield Committee of Belgium, Christiane Logie, was appointed in 2002 to act as honorary secretary. Representatives of UNESCO and ICCROM attend the meetings of ICBS and invitations are usually extended to representatives of other organizations such as ICRC and the Swedish-based Cultural Heritage Without Borders.

### NATIONAL BLUE SHIELD COMMITTEES

One of the aims of ICBS has been to encourage the establishment of national Blue Shield committees. In 2002 it formulated the following criteria for the recognition of national committees:

1. 'Initiatives for establishing a national committee of the Blue Shield should fully recognise the ICBS Charter as adopted by ICBS in Strasbourg, 14 April 2000 [as recorded above].
2. Initiatives for establishing a national committee of the Blue Shield should have the support of the national representatives of all four non-governmental organisations listed above, which together form the ICBS. In case of doubt, the bureaux of the four non-governmental organisations will decide on the respective representational claims.
3. An appropriate representative of initiatives to establish a national committee of the Blue Shield should inform the ICBS of the membership, contact addresses, meeting schedules and agendas and relevant national events of the proposed national committee.
4. An appropriate person or organisation on behalf of initiatives to establish a national committee of the Blue Shield may request the ICBS to grant official recognition. The ICBS has the sole right to decide whether to accord such recognition' (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/nc-req.htm>).

A distinctive feature of national committees is that they usually bring together not only the four professional disciplines represented by the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but also representatives of the government, the armed forces and the emergency services. They are also able, in some circumstances, to deploy resources including experts, equipment and finance. They may be able to assist in emergency activity in other countries. For example the Blue Shield Committee of France assisted with emergency rescue work following the floods in Eastern Europe which damaged materials held in libraries and archives. Apart from responses to emergencies, they can encourage institutions to prepare disaster plans, train military and emergency services personnel in the steps to be taken to protect cultural institutions and collections. They can also work with customs and police to identify cultural property illegally imported or exported. They can work to raise public awareness of the need to protect cultural

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property and encourage their governments to sign up to and observe international legislation such as the Second Protocol. At the time of writing, the following national Blue Shield committees have been established: Belgium, Benin, Czech Republic, France, Italy, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Madagascar, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and Venezuela. It was reported that Blue Shield committees are also in the process of being formed in Australia, Canada and Peru. Needless to say, ICBS would like to see national Blue Shield committees set up in every country.

### RECENT ACTIONS

In February 2003 ICBS decided to take a rather more proactive stance by, in the first instance, issuing public statements. It raised concerns about:

- The lack of progress at that time in restoring cultural institutions in Afghanistan, in particular the urgent need to repair the roof of the national museum in Kabul (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/afg03.htm>)
- The adverse impact on cultural property of the continuing conflict in Israel and Palestine, (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/me03.htm>) and
- The potential damage to cultural property in Iraq in the event of war (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/statement-iraq.htm>).

As the then president of ICBS, I wrote to Presidents George Bush and Saddam Hussein and Prime Minister Tony Blair urging them to take all necessary steps to protect cultural property in the event of war breaking out. Copies of these letters were sent to the ambassadors of these three countries in The Hague and to their representatives at UNESCO. A letter along the same lines was sent to the London *Guardian* which was published (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/letters/story/0,,910846,00.html>).

In the immediate aftermath of the war, in the light of extensive media coverage of the looting and destruction of the national library and archives in Baghdad and historic archaeological

sites, ICBS issued a further statement (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/iraq1704.htm>). It expressed the horror of ICBS members at the reports of looting, destruction and loss of material at the archives, libraries and museums. Coalition forces were urged to take effective steps to protect collections, institutions and sites. The governments of the USA and the UK were also urged to ratify the Second Protocol to The Hague Convention. Letters similar in content were sent to George Bush and Tony Blair.

UNESCO called an emergency meeting in Paris in April. ICBS was fully represented. But the committee's representatives had to fight hard to ensure that archives and libraries were included in the report of the meeting and that one of the recommendations should be that a multi-disciplinary mission should be sent to Iraq to investigate the situation and make recommendations. This was agreed. ICBS was also represented, by the Secretary General of ICOM, at a meeting called in May in Lyon by INTERPOL to discuss measures to be taken to prevent illicit trade in cultural goods illegally exported from Iraq.

The UNESCO mission went to Iraq in June. Although a librarian had been identified by UNESCO as an appropriate member of the team, Jean-Marie Arnoult, Inspector General of Libraries in France, he was prevented from going. The official reason was that the size of the mission had to be reduced on security grounds. ICBS protested strongly about this situation and, as a by-product gained considerably publicity about the impact of the war and its aftermath on cultural property in general and on archives and libraries in particular. UNESCO sent a second mission at the end of June 2003. Jean-Marie Arnoult was a member of this mission. He presented his report to a stunned audience at IFLA's World Library and Information Congress in Berlin in August 2003 (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/iraq2407.htm>). Even now his words make sober reading. Showing graphic images of filing cabinets overflowing with ashes, he explained that the area of the archives (in the National Library building) was probably looted before being totally destroyed by fire. Another

slide showed about 40 or 50 plastic bags dumped for storage in a mosque in Revolution City (formerly Saddam City) with books from the National Library. According to Arnoult, these were mainly archival documents from the mandate period of Iraq up to 1958. 'Conditions are very bad (high temperature and humidity, dust, insects and rodents.' Included in a catalogue of destruction were the national library and archives which was in such a poor state that it would have to be pulled down, the restoration unit of the Centre for Manuscripts which had been completely looted and the Basra Public Library which had also been totally looted and burnt. A huge effort was, and is, required not only to retrieve, restore, protect and rehouse the historic materials, but also to build a modern archives, library and information structure as part of the process of rebuilding the state of Iraq.

A modest practical initiative of ICBS was to post information about the state of cultural property in Iraq on the Blue Shield web pages hosted by IFLA at [www.ifla.org/blueshield.htm](http://www.ifla.org/blueshield.htm).

Until the middle of 2003 the above case study encapsulates as much as ICBS has been able to do: urge, exhort governments and other agencies, issue statements, gain publicity, identify possible experts, and encourage greater awareness via the media amongst the public of the irreversible damage being done to the world's cultural heritage. Understandably in the face of reports of suicide bombings, ambushes, mortar attacks and thousands of deaths and injuries, it is not an easy message to convey.

### THE CULTURAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE

However, a very welcome development came through an initiative of the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development of the Netherlands. It offered to set up the Cultural Emergency Response (CER) jointly with ICBS. With an initial three-year funding of 400,000 euros, it was launched in September 2003 at the Prinsenhof, Delft, Netherlands in the presence of Prince Johan Friso and Prince Constantijn. The

objectives of CER are to offer emergency aid in the event of damage to, or destruction of, cultural property as a result of man-made or natural disaster (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/iraq030304.htm>).

A number of possible actions to help restore cultural property were investigated with the help of authorities in Iraq, especially Wishyar Muhammed, the Coalition Provisional Authority's Library Adviser, in the light of the report by Jean-Marie Arnoult. Eventually it was decided to provide funds to assist in the restoration of the central reading room of the Baghdad University Library. On completion of the project, Mr. Muhammed said:

Following the collapse of ... Saddam's regime in Iraq last April not only government offices and public buildings were looted and burned but universities, libraries and museums were not safe from such a barbarous act. Among them was the Central Library of the University of Baghdad. We were desperate and thought that the library would never reopen. However, it was only through the help of some good friends of the Iraqi people and human culture and civilization who showed interest in helping the library, that it [has] become possible to refurbish it once more. Among them was the Cultural Emergency Response (CER) which made a generous donation of 25,000 Euros to be spent on the library's reading room (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/iraq030304.htm>).

Since then CER has provided 25,000 euros to restore and maintain the fourteenth-century mosque in Mestassa, Morocco. An earthquake had hit the area earlier in the year. The mosque remained standing, but the structure of the building was damaged and its stability threatened. The work was done to preserve the mosque as a model of sustainable building in North Morocco and as a safe social centre and school (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/PrinceClausFund-092004.pdf>).

In December 2003 the oasis city of Bam in southern Iran was badly hit by an earthquake. The Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization has a documentation centre in the citadel, the largest earthen construction in the world. With 25,000

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euros from the CER it was possible for the archive to be reinstated. In addition to saving its own archive, consisting of many thousands of documents, existing records and documents from elsewhere on the period prior to the earthquake, including aerial photographs, and maps, are being gathered and a new archive is being developed documenting the situation after the earthquake (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/PrinceClausFund-092004.pdf>).

Eventually it is hoped that funds from other charitable organizations with an interest in the preservation of the world's cultural heritage, together with modest contributions from the founding organizations of ICBS, will augment the initial money generously made available by the Prince Claus Fund. Meanwhile, the aspiration of the CER on its launch that by timely responses it would make a difference to help ensure the restoration of destroyed or damaged cultural property is being realized.

### THE TORINO DECLARATION

In July 2004 the first international meeting of the International and National Committees of the Blue Shield was held in Torino, Italy. Representatives of the founding members of ICBS and of the National Blue Shield Committees of Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Italy, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Madagascar, Norway, Poland, United Kingdom and Ireland, and Venezuela attended together with representatives of CER and Cultural Heritage Without Borders.

The meeting adopted the following recommendations:

- A. 'That the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed conflict adopted at The Hague in 1954, the First Protocol of 1954 and the Second

Protocol of 1999 be signed and ratified by all states parties to UNESCO and to the United Nations,

- B. (1) that the United Nations and other international organisations include the protection of movable and immovable cultural heritage, and of vital records (the core current documents that provide evidence of citizens' rights and entitlements and the basis for continuity of administration), from destruction and displacement in the mandate of their peace support operations, (2) encourage national governments to include the protection of the movable and immovable cultural heritage from destruction and displacement in the mandate of their humanitarian operations,
- C. that governments and relevant organisations of the United Nations act to prevent looting and destruction of cultural heritage sites and buildings and illicit trade in cultural property
- D. considering the importance of risk preparedness, response and recovery, recommend that cultural heritage professionals integrate these stages into their programmes,
- E. recommend that ICA, ICOM, ICOMOS and IFLA national members should create a National Committee of the Blue Shield, where such committees do not exist, and urge national authorities to support these committees' roles and actions to protect movable and immovable heritage in the event of natural or man-made disaster, and
- F. decide to establish and strengthen ICBS as a visible, effective entity' (<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/torino-declaration2004.pdf>).

As I hope this article has shown, some progress towards the latter recommendation has been made during the eight years since its inception, but a great deal more is still to be achieved to realize it in full.

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### **ABSTRACT**

The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) was established by four NGOs covering archives, libraries, monuments and sites, and museums to help coordinate activities in response to man-made and natural disasters affecting cultural property. Other aims included encouraging risk preparedness, public awareness of the need for the protection of cultural heritage and urging governments to sign up to and implement international legislation in this area. An informal organization with no resources of its own, it has made some progress towards achieving these aims by working closely with UNESCO and other agencies. Recently it has become more active, especially in relation to the damage to and destruction of cultural property in Iraq. It has issued public statements and tried to raise awareness of the scale of the problem. With the initiative of the Prince Claus Fund of the Netherlands it has established the Cultural Emergency Response which has facilitated restoration work in Iraq, Iran and Morocco. Some progress has been made towards its aim to become the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross.