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**Preparing for the Worst, Planning for the Best: Protecting
our Cultural Heritage from Disaster**

The Blue Shield: the Cultural Red Cross?

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Those terrible images of the looting, destruction and torching of the National Museum, National Library and Archives and other cultural institutions in Baghdad reminded us all (if indeed we needed reminding so soon after the rocket-propelled destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan) of just how vulnerable our cultural heritage is.



The records of human civilisations; archives, books, manuscripts, tablets, monuments, artefacts of all kinds, historic sites, and the structures which house them, are more than the cultural property of those particular civilisations they record, and their successors. They individually 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.



We need them to survive down the centuries so that we can anchor ourselves both in the past and in the present. So they need protection from disasters – those brought on by people (war, conflict, terrorism), by nature (floods, earthquake and the local environment), and accident (fire and other disasters). They also need protection from neglect, such as lack of investment in staff, equipment and maintenance.

One form of protection is the Blue Shield. The Blue Shield is the official symbol of The Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954. It makes provision for the safeguarding of cultural property paralleling the humanitarian provisions in the much better known Geneva Conventions.

The Hague convention requires states to:

- prepare in time of peace for the safeguarding of cultural property against the effects of armed conflict

- refrain from any act of hostility against such property
- respect cultural property by refraining from any use of the property likely to expose it to damage or destruction in the event of armed conflict
- prohibit, prevent and put a stop to theft, pillage, or misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism directed against, cultural property
- refrain from any reprisals against cultural property
- introduce military regulations to ensure observance of the Convention and foster respect for the culture and cultural property of all peoples
- establish services and personnel within their armed forces to secure such respect and to co-operate with civilian authorities.

However, the provisions for enforcement and for sanctions in the event of non-compliance are “remarkably weak and rather vague” according to expert Patrick Boylan.⁽¹⁾

In 1999, a Second Protocol to The Hague Convention was adopted. It greatly limited the circumstances in which an attack on cultural property could be mounted on the grounds of “military necessity”. It also made provision for “exceptional protection” for the most important sites and institutions.

Perhaps most important of all, it introduced the concept of a “cultural war crime”.

For the first time, once the Protocol comes into effect, there will be permanent institutional arrangements to oversee the application of the Convention. The ‘States Parties’ (that is the member states which have signed and ratified the Convention and its Protocol) will meet every two years. There will also be a 12-member committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which will meet at least once a year.

The International Committee of the Blue Shield is formally recognised in the Protocol as an advisory body to the Committee and to the States Parties.

When will the Protocol come into effect? When a minimum of 20 states have signed and ratified the Protocol. Fifteen have done so at present. We know that several (including the United Kingdom) have announced their intention to do so shortly. We hope that sufficient will do so in time for it to come into effect in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of The Hague Convention – 2004.

Why is it important? Apart from the enhanced protection it will give to designated sites, the concept of a war crime is important. It will mean that those responsible for the deliberate damage to and destruction of cultural institutions (and collections) can be prosecuted. This should act as a stronger deterrent compared with the current sanctions.

What is the International Committee of the Blue Shield? It is a small body with large ambitions. It was founded in 1996 by the four international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) representing the interests of archives, libraries, monuments and sites, and museums; The International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and IFLA. It works closely with UNESCO, whose representatives attend its meetings, and a representative of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) is an observer. We have also recently decided to invite a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Our remit is to:

- to facilitate international responses to threats or emergencies threatening cultural property
- to encourage 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 heritage
- to consult and co-operate with other bodies including UNESCO, ICCROM and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

I think that you will agree that, for an organisation without a penny to its name, it is demanding list.

What do we do? Perhaps I can best answer this by a case study. Each of the four founding organisations is represented by one, or sometimes two, people. One representative is usually the Secretary General of the organisation. We meet three or four times a year. Each of the four NGOs takes it in turns to host the meetings – usually in Paris. When it is IFLA's turn Marie-Thérèse Varlamoff (who is one of IFLA's regular representatives) arranges for us to meet in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. We discuss current issues. Recent examples have included the floods in Eastern Europe, the war in Afghanistan, the conflict in Israel and Palestine and, of course, the war in Iraq.

At our meeting in February this year, we decided to issue statements, raising our concerns about:

- the lack of progress in restoring cultural institutions in Afghanistan
- the impact of the continuing conflict in Israel and Palestine, and
- the potential damage to cultural property in Iraq, if war broke out.

We issued these as press releases. As the current 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”. I sent copies of these letters to the ambassadors of the three countries in The Hague and their representatives at UNESCO. I wrote a letter to the London *Guardian* newspaper raising the same concerns, which they published.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, we issued a further statement expressing our horror at the reports of looting, destruction and loss of material at the archives, libraries and museums. We urged the coalition forces to protect the collections, institutions and sites. We also urged the governments of the USA and the UK to ratify the Second Protocol. I wrote again to George Bush and Tony Blair along the same lines.

UNESCO called an emergency meeting in Paris on 17th April. We were fully represented. We fought 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 would be sent to Iraq to investigate the situation and make recommendations. This was agreed. We were also represented at a meeting in early May called by INTERPOL in Lyon to discuss measures to be taken to prevent illicit trade in cultural goods illegally exported from Iraq.

A mission was sent in June. Although a librarian had been identified by UNESCO to take part – Jean-Marie Arnoult (the predecessor of Marie-Therese Varlamoff as Director of IFLA/PAC) – he was prevented from going. The official reason was that the size of the mission had to be reduced on security grounds. We protested strongly about this and gained a great deal of publicity.

We posted on the Blue Shield pages on IFLANET reports of the situation in Iraq as we received them.

UNESCO sent a second mission on 30 June returning on 6 July. Jean-Marie Arnoult was a member of this mission. At the time of preparing

this paper we anxiously await the report and its recommendations. A preliminary report from M. Arnoult makes sober reading:

- “The area of the archives [in the National Library building] was probably looted before being totally destroyed by fire.”



“A number of plastic bags (about 40-50) are stored in a mosque in Revolution City (formerly Saddam City) with books of the National Library.... The content was mostly archival documents from the mandate period up to 1958.”



“Conditions are very bad (high temperature and humidity, dust, insects and rodents).”



“The structure of the building [National Library] is destroyed: it cannot be restored and must be pulled down.”



“The restoration unit of the Centre for Manuscripts has been completely looted.”



“The [Basra central Public Library] has been totally looted and burnt. Nothing remaining except walls weakened by fire. It is not possible to restore the building.”



Clearly a huge effort is required, not only to retrieve, restore, protect and re-house the historic materials, but also to build a modern archives, library and information infrastructure as part of the process of rebuilding the state of Iraq.

Until now that is as much as we have been able to do – urge, exhort governments and agencies, issue statements, gain publicity, encourage greater awareness via the media among the public of the irreversible damage being done to our cultural heritage.

We also encourage the establishment of national Blue Shield committees. So far, committees have been established in: Belgium, Benin, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Macedonia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and the United Kingdom & Ireland. National Committees are also being established in Australia, Canada and Peru.

They can sometimes carry out positive action, for example by sending experts and equipment to other countries, in response to emergencies. In some cases they can raise funds to support local response teams. Typically, national Blue Shield committees bring together representatives of the four professional disciplines and the military authorities and the emergency services. Apart from responses to emergencies, they can encourage institutions to prepare disaster plans and 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.

Very soon we hope that ICBS will be able to undertake positive action in response to emergencies. Up to now we have had no resources of our own, and no direct access to any external funds. Very shortly we hope to be able to announce that an emergency rescue fund will be set up in partnership with a respected foundation in the Netherlands. The intention is that, with the minimum of red tape, we will be able to mount a rescue mission, send some equipment or essential materials to make a real difference on the ground. Success in modest actions like this, we hope, will enable us to draw down funds from other foundations, so that we can intervene in a larger number of situations.

When the Second Protocol comes into force, ICBS will gain official recognition. We will act as advisers when an application is made to designate a cultural institution or collection as needing enhanced protection. My hope is that this recognition will, of itself, enable us to

attract greater financial resources. Meanwhile, in cooperation with ICOM and ICOMOS, we hope to establish a small office in Paris.

What can you do to help make the Blue Shield to be more effective?

You could urge your government to ratify the Second Protocol of The Hague Convention, if it has not already done so. A full list of the countries that have ratified the Protocol is available on the Blue Shield pages of IFLANET. The sooner 20 countries ratify, the sooner it will come into effect.

You could get into contact with your national Blue Shield committee. They almost certainly will welcome your support. A full list of the national committees and those in the process of being established, together with contact details are on the Blue Shield pages on IFLANET.

If your country does not have a committee, take steps to set one up. The criteria for a national committee to be recognised by ICBS are listed on the Blue Shield pages on IFLANET.

You could publicise the activities of ICBS and the national committees and the need to protect cultural heritage by writing to the professional and national press.

If you are interested in learning more about the situation of archives and libraries in Iraq, please come to the special session on Iraq at 8:30 in the morning on Tuesday 5th August in Hall 4 during the World Library and Information Congress next week.

The protection, rescue and restoration of our cultural heritage are vital tasks. To do the job properly we need the energy, commitment and resources – and recognition -available to the Red Cross.

My hope is that, one day the term ‘Blue Shield’ will have the same resonance as the ‘Red Cross’ and that we shall have the resources to establish the cultural equivalent of *Medicins sans Frontières*.

Reference:

(1) Boylan, Patrick. The 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its 1954 and 1999 Protocols. In: A Blue Shield for the protection of our endangered cultural heritage: proceedings of the open session co-organized by PAC core

activity and the Section on National Libraries. Edited by Corine Koch. International Preservation Issues number four. Paris: IFLA Core Activity on Preservation and Conservation, 2003. pp 4-15. ISBN: 2-912743-028

Further information:

Further information about the International Committee of the Blue Shield is provided in:

MacKenzie, George. The Blue Shield: symbol of cultural heritage protection. In: op.cit pp16-18.

More information, including a link to The Hague Convention is provided in the Blue Shield pages on IFLANET at:

<http://www.ifla.org/blueshield.htm>

