

4 December 2002

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on the United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage**

Excellencies
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

It has been said that "Culture is the mirror of humanity" and cultural heritage represents a historical record and understanding of "the entire spirit of a people in terms of its values, actions, works, institutions, monuments and sites." The current Director General of UNESCO aptly described in his message and I quote, "the cultural heritage of a people is the memory of its living culture. It is expressed in many different forms, both tangible and intangible. The origins of this heritage are multifarious, too. In retracing its own cultural lineage, in recognizing the many different influences that have marked its history and shaped its identity, a people is better able to build peaceful relations with other peoples, to pursue what is often an age-old dialogue and to forge its future."

On 4 December 2001, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 56/8 to proclaim the year 2002 as the United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage to raise awareness of the importance of protecting the world cultural heritage. The resolution invited United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to serve as the lead agency for the year.

Cultural heritage is a testimony of everyday life. It includes monumental remnants as well as industrial heritage, local and indigenous knowledge, handicrafts, design, language, oral traditions, rites and beliefs, music, dance and song, medicinal and culinary traditions and so on.

All too often, heritage is the target of destruction by virtue of its value as a symbol and an identity. Attack on cultural heritage symbolizes the attack on the group as such, and indicates intolerance and hostility. The protection of the heritage, and its transmission to future generations, are therefore, ethical imperatives.

The proclamation of the UN year of cultural heritage took place just nine months after the destruction of two giant, 1,500-year-old sculptures of Buddha, representing a culture of tolerance in the Afghan Valley of Bamiyan. This barbarian act of the Taliban shocked the whole world and has been considered as a symbol of "crimes against culture." But this is not the only example of cultural vandalism. Bosnia's cultural heritage was systematically destroyed to wipe out all traces of the past shared by the different communities. I recall the beauty of the well-known Old Bridge at Mostar, which not only connected two parts of one town, but also gave the name to the town

and symbolized symbioses of Mostar's communities. It does not exist any more. Today, UNESCO and the World Bank are coordinating the work of multicultural teams rebuilding the Mostar Bridge. I strongly believe that the new Mostar Bridge will again symbolize tolerance and will help to bridge over the dark periods of the region's history. I come from a region rich in cultural sites that have suffered from wars, plundering and most recently from flooding. We need protection strategies against natural disasters which have destroyed important cultural heritage sites.

Armed conflict poses the most obvious risk to the destruction of cultural heritage. As a result, the first international instrument on the protection of cultural heritage focused on this area. In 1954, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, strengthened by two protocols. In 1970, the Convention on the Means of prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was adopted to combat plundering and trafficking of such property. Thirty years ago, the 1972 Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, another fundamental pillar, the most popular and well known in the body of legal text on heritage was adopted. Today, the number of State parties reached 175 and the Convention stands as a vital instrument for concrete action in preserving threatened cultural and natural sites. Furthermore, the Convention drew up the World Heritage List, which today includes 730 sites - 563 cultural, 144 natural and 23 mixed, in 125 countries. Bearing witness to exceptional achievements of civilizations and nature, these sites enjoy recognition for their "outstanding universal value." On this special occasion, I would like to encourage countries that have not yet joined the Convention and other related international heritage protection instruments, to do so at the earliest opportunity. I also urge the active involvement of institutions, organizations and individuals at the international, national and local levels to protect and preserve our common cultural heritage and share the financial responsibilities.