

21 September 2012

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
at the High-Level Debate on a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence**

Mr. Secretary-General,
Madam Director-General,
Distinguished Guests,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be here with you today on the International Day of Peace.

To begin with, please allow me to share with you two very personal experiences.

I remember as a child, on a family holiday to Greece, being amazed by the sight of the Acropolis in Athens. I was too young at the time to understand its full significance its central role in the birth of democracy, and the blueprint it provided for how to live as civilized human beings in a well-ordered society.

I was impressed by its immensity and grandeur and somehow knew, as children often do, that it was something exceptional.

This was a moment no doubt enjoyed by millions of tourists who have visited the Acropolis; it was important for me personally, as this was an unfamiliar experience, something from outside my own tradition. I wanted to know more and to learn more.

It awakened the realization in me that the world was a diverse and fascinating place, a world that I wanted to explore.

Years later, I experienced a different sort of visceral feeling, as I learned of the intentional destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban.

I felt not wonder and mystery, but shock and incomprehension as to what ideology could possibly legitimize the physical annihilation of those monumental statues.

In my mind, these two experiences have remained closely interlinked.

It is no coincidence that both of these extraordinary places are on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

At the time, the then Director-General of UNESCO Koichiro Matsuura called “the cold and calculated destruction” of the Bamiyan Buddhas a “cultural crime.”

The purposeful attempt to vandalize, loot, burn, desecrate, and destroy what others have built long ago, in the conviction that such deeds will somehow reinforce a historical narrative of one’s own, must be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

There are other contemporary examples of such horrors—the attacks on mausoleums in Timbuktu in Mali being the most recent.

All such acts should be identified clearly for what they are: revolting expressions of cultural cleansing.

Excellencies,

The World Heritage List identifies close to 1000 sites across the world, sites which the international community has committed to preserving.

All of those sites are unique in their own way, but what they offer in common is an entry-point into a civilization, a way to promote tolerance and understanding between societies.

Symbolically, each of these sites represent building-blocks for creating a culture of conflict prevention and peaceful resolution of disputes—the building-blocks of peace.

This is central to the work of the United Nations. It is with this in mind that I proposed the following theme for the 67th Session of the General Assembly: bringing about adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations by peaceful means.

Excellencies,

Peace should be understood and practiced by people as a part of the fabric of daily life. It is more than just a set of policies or worthy initiatives.

Although it is a basic human aspiration, we still need to develop a truly global consciousness that rejects violence and favors the peaceful resolution of disputes.

This is an aspect of the new type of humanism that the UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, has been advocating a humanism based on the principle that knowledge is a foundation for lasting peace, that the awareness of others must be nurtured and shared for the good of every member of society.

Ignorance is very often at the root of intolerance, hatred, and ultimately conflict and war.

That is why getting an education about the cultures of others is a precondition for dialogue about peace.

Without such dialogue, societies which are being undermined by multiple global crises affecting the economy, the environment, food and energy, may fall victim to indifference and intolerance.

Under such circumstances, divisions grow. If we lack proper vigilance, we will have failed to prevent creating the illusion that violence can be a solution to our disagreements.

Excellencies,

I believe culture has a prominent role to play in the search for peace. It is inherently important in itself, but its significance also lies in the way that we can all be enriched as human beings by looking beyond our own traditions.

Only when we embrace the view that individual cultures genuinely prosper and progress when they come into contact with others, can we say that the tide has inexorably turned in favor of peace and a common sense of destiny.

Thank you.