

The Blue Shield Initiative. Joining Efforts to Preserve our Cultural Heritage in Danger

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Each of you has certainly still in mind the destruction by the Taliban of the Bamian Buddhas. It was a shock for the entire cultural community. Each year dramatic and unexpected events erase part of our memory by destroying the documentary heritage that has been accumulated in our libraries, archives or museums. Two world wars, as well as unavoidable and recurrent disasters, have added to the already extensive list of documents that have vanished for ever. A list of libraries and archives that have been totally or partially destroyed has been compiled and published in 1996 by IFLA and ICA in the framework of the UNESCO „Memory of the World Programme”. It is appalling. The recent and dramatic events in Kosovo, East Timor or Sierra Leone, to quote just a few, testify the dangers threatening cultural heritage in the event of armed conflicts. Natural disasters like floods, fires, hurricanes or landslides do not unfortunately lack behind. Generally the danger seems very far away but you must always keep in mind that this can happen to you as well and the best way to respond is to be prepared and get ready. My concern today is to explain how institutions like libraries, archives and museums have decided to join to mitigate the consequences when a disaster strikes. This is why they created the „International Committee of the Blue Shield” (ICBS).

1. The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS)

The Blue Shield is the emblem of the Hague convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict which is used to mark cultural heritage sites so that they will receive the protection offered by the Convention. The „International Committee of the Blue Shield” is an international, independent, co-operative venture which gathers four professional NGOs. It was created in 1996 by the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Federation of Library

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Associations and Institutions (IFLA). These represent an unrivalled body of experts that can provide authorities and professionals with expertise and networks in case of armed conflict or natural disasters that could affect cultural heritage throughout the world. The four organisations are also working together to organise risk preparedness at an international level and to encourage it at a local level.

2. The Hague Convention

The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict adopted at The Hague (The Netherlands) in 1954, in the wake of massive destruction of the cultural heritage in the Second World War, is the first international agreement accepted world-wide and focusing exclusively on the protection of cultural heritage. It covers immovables and movables, including monuments of architecture, art or history, archaeological sites, works of art, manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest, as well as scientific collections of all kinds.

The states which are party to the Convention are obliged to lessen the consequences for cultural heritage of an armed conflict and to:

- take preventive measures for such protection not only in time of hostilities (when it is usually too late), *but also in time of peace*;
- safeguard and respect cultural property during armed conflict (this obligation also applies in conflicts of a non-international character);
- mark certain important buildings and monuments with the emblem of the Blue Shield.

The Convention was adopted together with a Protocol which prohibits the export of cultural property from occupied territory and requires return of such property to the state from which it was removed. The Protocol also expressly forbids the appropriation of cultural property as war reparation.

As of 19 July 2001, 101 states are parties to this Convention, 83 of which are also Parties to the Protocol.

3. Second Protocol to The Hague Convention

Following barbaric acts committed against cultural property in the course of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, a review of the Convention was ini-

tiated in 1991 to draw up a new agreement to improve the Convention. A Second Protocol to The Hague Convention was adopted at a diplomatic conference at The Hague in March 1999. This Second Protocol provides greater protection than before and creates a new category of enhanced protection for cultural heritage that is particularly important for humankind, enjoys proper legal protection at national level and is not used for military purposes. It also specifies the sanctions to be imposed for serious violations of cultural property and defines the conditions in which individual criminal responsibility shall apply. Finally, it establishes a twelve-member Intergovernmental Committee to oversee the implementation of the Convention and the Second Protocol. This Protocol officially recognises ICBS as one of the organisations authorised to contribute, in a consultative role, to the work of the Committee.

4. ICBS Goals and Principles

The main objectives of ICBS are :

- to facilitate international response to threats or emergencies through co-operation between ICBS and national organisations;
- to propose its services in terms of expertise;
- to encourage safeguarding and respect for cultural property and particularly to promote standards for risk preparedness;
- to train experts at a national or regional level to prevent, control and recover from disasters.

In order to reach these objectives ICBS has three major areas for actions which are :

- raising awareness about damage to cultural heritage;
- implementing programmes for preventing and managing disasters and for rebuilding afterwards;
- identifying resources for prevention and rapid intervention in emergency situations.

The vision of the ICBS is that in time the Blue Shield will become for cultural heritage what the Red Cross is for humanitarian protection. ICBS has elaborated its Charter in Strasbourg, April 2000, and decided to respect the following principles :

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- joint actions
- independence
- neutrality
- professionalism
- respect of cultural identity
- work on non profit basis.

5. Stages of Intervention

The action of ICBS is threefold and takes place before, during and after a conflict or a disaster. So far the preventive phase has been the best developed within ICBS action plan and implies :

- to assess the risks and raise awareness of threats among governments, professionals and the public;
- to improve risk preparedness: this phase starts very much upstream with the selection of an appropriate site for the building. Another important point is the creation and updating of inventories of the collections. Those inventories should be duplicated and stored in a different place and accessible in the event of conflict or disaster; it is also recommended to duplicate those documents which are unique or of specific value or very often consulted and to store one copy of each duplicate in a different place;
- to train professional staffs to intervene during and after disasters and to organise workshops;
- to promote the elaboration of disaster plans, especially in national institutions.

ICBS intends to emphasise the fact that preventive measures are useful not only in the event of a disaster but also in the daily management of an institution and that they contribute to the good care of collections.

Hopefully ICBS will prove to be able in the future to respond to disastrous situations by:

- providing a pool of experts through its international, cross-sectoral network of professionals;
- raising core funds to provide means of immediate response;

- disseminating information and sharing resources.

In the event of a disaster, ICBS should be able to play the role of a consultant thanks to its pool of experts and its network of professionals and to assess damages and provide expertise as to how to undertake the recovery.

6. Past or Ongoing Activities

Despite the lack of resources, human or financial, ICBS has achieved a number of actions concerning specific endangered areas such as Kosovo and Afghanistan. It has participated in various meetings convened by UNESCO concerning the new Hague Protocol and organised in November 1998 an international seminar in Slovenia to train professional staffs to intervene following disasters.

Kosovo

Several initiatives concerning Kosovo were taken by the various ICBS members:

- a mission to the national museum of Kosovo in Pristina (ICOM and *Patrimoine sans Frontières*), November 1999;
- a mission to the archives of Kosovo (ICA, UNESCO and the Council of Europe), December 1999;
- a conference of the national director of archives of former Yugoslavia and neighbouring countries (ICA) November 1999;
- financial assistance (IFLA) to salvage rare manuscripts, December 1999;
- a mission to the libraries of Kosovo (IFLA) in February 2000.¹

Afghanistan

A meeting was organised in close co-operation with UNESCO and other organisations in September 98 and an action plan was drawn up to try and stop the transit through Pakistan and the commerce of Afghan cultural properties. UNESCO was requested to establish a cultural officer post in Islamabad and to enhance world's public awareness of Afghan monuments and sites, libraries and archives documents through their inclusion on the List of the World cultural and natural Heritage and in the International Register for the „Memory of the World”.

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In June 2002 ICBS members met in Paris to try and draw an action plan for Afghanistan. A report by a UNESCO member, back from a mission in Kabul, proved the difficulty of implementing actions or even sending a mission to assess the situation.

The Radenci International Seminar

An international seminar was organised in November 1998 in Slovenia to train professional staff to intervene following disasters. Participants from 12 countries, drawn from museums, archives, libraries and historic buildings, spent a week discussing strategies and tactics for dealing with disasters. Case studies on war damage in Bosnia and Croatia, flood damage in Poland, earthquake damage in Italy, together with the experiences of Dutch and Swedish military personnel, including a former UN commander in Bosnia, provided the raw material for the seminar, which was targeted at personnel in eastern and southern Europe.

The seminar drafted a joint statement, to be known as the *Radenci Declaration* calling for:

- the protection, safeguard and respect of cultural property – in both normal and exceptional situation – to be included in national policies and programmes;
- strategies to assess and reduce risk and to improve response capacity in the event of threat to cultural property to be developed;
- institutions caring for the cultural heritage, to integrate risk preparedness and management within their activities.

7. Blue Shield Network

The great strength of Blue Shield is that it is cross-sectoral, bringing together professions and institutions across the cultural spectrum. By pooling their expertise, and drawing in military authorities and emergency services, the Blue Shield is a potentially powerful model for managing disaster risks at a national level. Organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) certainly stand as major partners in the implementation of ICBS activities. It is essential that the variety of persons concerned by risk preparedness and response to disasters may also be implied, not only when the disaster strikes but before. Contacts should be established with the fire brigade and the army units specifically concerned by cultural

heritage, as it is the case in The Netherlands for instance. The officials in charge of the City or the Country representatives should also be made aware of existing dangers and they should be asked to bring the co-operation of all the public services they are supervising in the event of a disaster. It is equally important to contact the suppliers susceptible to be called for in the event of a disaster.

8. National Committees of the Blue Shield

Since its creation it has been obvious that ICBS efficiency would be enhanced by the creation of national Blue Shield committees. It is vital that the international initiative is taken up and supported by local initiatives. Blue Shield committees have been or are being formed in a number of countries. Belgium was the first to do so, later followed by The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France. There are steps taken in Poland and Italy to create a national committee and I was informed two weeks ago of the existence of a Czech Committee. Some other countries - Switzerland and the US - have similar organisations.

You all have an important role to play in the development of those national Blue Shield Committees. At a national level, each of you must throw your weight behind the future body, and lobby your government to ratify the international measures to protect the cultural heritage. You should encourage co-operation with other professions and bodies to improve emergency preparedness and help raise public awareness of threats of all sorts to cultural heritage and measures to combat them.

9. Strategy for the Future

Apart from the creation of a network and of national Blue Shield Committees, the Blue Shield intends to:

- document past and occurring disasters and disseminate the information world-wide - which means to organise meetings in order to advocate risk preparedness and the Blue Shield and/or to publish articles on the subject in order to raise awareness among cultural professionals;
- assess possible risks according to the political or geographical situation and to take all necessary measures in order to mitigate the consequences of unexpected disasters – which means to conduct surveys on the existence of potential risks, to list and prioritise them;

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- list all resource persons, suppliers, institutions or organisations susceptible to intervene and bring a quick response in case of disaster – which means setting up lists and update them regularly;
- promote the establishment of a disaster plan in each cultural institution with a national responsibility – which means to draw guidelines for disaster planning and to organise training sessions (simulating disasters) for the staff;
- promote the ratification and implementation by governments of The Hague Convention and the new Protocol.

To conclude I would like to insist upon the important role that members from LIBER, because they represent so many libraries in countries where Blue Shield is still not existing, can play. At a national level, LIBER representatives must lobby their government to ratify the international measures to protect the cultural heritage. As a professional association you should encourage co-operation with other professions and bodies in order to improve emergency preparedness. At the local level, each of you can provide personal skills and help to raise public awareness of threats to cultural heritage and measures to combat them. The efficiency of Blue Shield relies more on professional expertise, good will and commitment than on financial abundance. Let us start first by creating the network and deciding on a strategy. A strong organisation at the beginning will guarantee the success of rescue operations which, because disasters occur unexpectedly, cannot be planned. Once we know where we are going, we shall try to get whatever resources we need and we will be in a position to implement fund raising campaigns to help disasters wherever they occur. The Blue Shield is a joint venture and we need you.

REFERENCES

- 1 The full report is available on the IFLA web site at <<http://www.ifla.org>>.