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Speech of the Netherlands Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs at the occasion of the opening of the Diplomatic Conference for the Adoption of a Second Protocol to the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict

Netherlands Secretary of State

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Speech of the Netherlands Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs at the occasion of the opening of the Diplomatic Conference for the Adoption of a Second Protocol to the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict

Director-General of UNESCO,
Ambassadors,
Mayor of The Hague,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Realizing that lawyers and military officials are probably the majority of my audience here today and thus at the risk of my words falling on deaf ears, I nevertheless see it as my mission as Secretary of State responsible for cultural heritage, to acknowledge the importance of this Diplomatic Conference from a cultural perspective.

As we draw to the close of this century it is upon us to reflect on what it has brought us and what the century ahead will bring. At the height of its enlightenment humanity has inflicted more atrocities on its own kind than ever before in history. Even important developments such as those in the scientific field, have turned against us. The technology of killing and destruction are more effective than ever and cultural heritage has also paid the price.

The Second World War was no doubt the peak of human barbarism. In Rotterdam, one of the major cities in The Netherlands, only three historic buildings were spared. At the end of this war, the Laurens Church, the post-office and the townhall were all that remained of what used to be a city of historic importance. Of course many other examples exist of the large scale upon which cultural heritage was destroyed.

Because the Second World War bluntly indicated that the protection of cultural heritage in times of armed conflict fell short, one can say that this war paved the way for the first international convention specifically directed to the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict.

Now why was it felt important by the international community to protect the cultural heritage and why does the international community feel that 45 years after the adoption of the 1954 Convention, an effort should be made to improve the level of protection of cultural heritage? What makes our heritage worthwhile spending two weeks in The Hague for?

Our generation has inherited a wealth of cultural heritage that embodies the collective memory of communities around the world. In times of globalization and 'MacDonaldization' of society, people feel the need for a cultural identity. Cultural heritage plays a fundamental part in this quest and can be a binding force on the local or national level.

In that sense the importance of cultural heritage goes beyond its aesthetic and historic value. Cultural heritage also represents a social and economic resource, contributes to the socio-economic development of a society and to its social and cultural unity. In this conception, the protection and preservation of cultural heritage is not just something that concerns museum officials, restoration experts or for that matter the Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs. It concerns all responsible for a democratic and diverse society. The range of expertise represented here today is exemplary of the need for an integrated and interdisciplinary approach.

However controversial this may sound, the awareness of the relevance of cultural heritage for people's cultural identity has made our patrimony even more vulnerable in times of conflict. Destroying cultural heritage affects the identity of a people and can have a destabilizing and disintegrating effect on society.

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in deliberate acts of destruction directed against cultural objects. Intentional acts of destruction targeted at cultural property, causing deliberate rather than incidental damage, have been reported in recent conflicts all over the world.

It was one of these conflicts that led the international community, in November 1991, to the adoption of a Resolution calling for reinforcement of UNESCO's action for the protection of the world cultural heritage. It stated with a sense of understatement, *inter alia*, that:

"...the international system of safeguards of the world heritage does not appear to be satisfactory, as indicated by the ever-increasing dangers due to armed conflicts"

All Member States were called upon to 'increase their efforts to achieve better implementation of the existing instruments' and the Director-General of UNESCO was asked to comprise an evaluation of the 1954 Hague Convention.

A first step in the right direction was the report written by Professor Patrick Boylan. The conclusions of his thorough evaluation have proven relevant ever since and have been taken into account in drafting the Second Protocol.

We have come a long way since November 1991. Although I fully realize that you will spend the next two weeks fervently debating and discussing a Draft Second Protocol that is not yet perfect, the fact that so many delegations have ratified the 1954 Hague Convention recently and are now willing to co-operate in drafting supplementary Protocol, is an indication of the interest taken by many states in the protection of cultural property.

Cees Nooteboom, a contemporary Dutch writer, when witnessing the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the destruction of a 'monument' that will have caused little distress, wrote:

"Visible history always has something ecstatic, moving, unerving. No-one can escape it. And no-one knows what is about to happen."

You, ladies and gentlemen, participants in this Conference have the difficult but rewarding task to prevent certain things from happening to our visible history: the destruction and damage to the cultural heritage of all peoples in times of armed conflict. By adopting a Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention the chances of damage being done will be reduced and those nevertheless engaged in harming it, held responsible.

I wish you every luck in attaining this important goal.