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Education and culture top priorities for UNESCO Director-General's first visit to Iraq

Baghdad, 7 May – Literacy, higher education and the restoration of a World Heritage site were top priorities when Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met in Baghdad today. Following their meeting the Director General signed three memoranda of understanding with the Government of Iraq.

“UNESCO’s leadership in education and cultural heritage builds on our existing work and notable successes in Iraq since we started here more than six years ago,” the Director General said. “We are adding to our activities now with the support of the Government of Iraq and we appreciate this vote of confidence.”

The memoranda of understanding focus on two critical areas for the Iraqi government, education and the preservation of historical sites. The Iraqi government will work with UNESCO on the following activities:

- A National Literacy Campaign: Designed to reduce illiteracy by 50% in the next five years. Illiteracy is currently pegged at about 5 million people (signed with the Ministry of Education).
- Establishing the College of Archaeology: To be located at the universities of Samara and Kofa for the purposes of developing a national capacity to maintain and protect the heritage of the country for future generations (signed with the Ministry of Higher Education).
- Restoration of the Al-Malawyah Minaret, the Great Mosque, Samara: Part of the Samara Archaeological City, which was placed on the list of World Heritage Sites in danger. UNESCO has been actively involved in restoration of historical sites in Iraq, including the Great Mosque of Samara, as well as protecting Iraqi antiquities (signed with the Ministry of Culture).

The Director General’s delegation included Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned in her capacity as both First Lady of Qatar and UNESCO Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education. Her Highness confirmed that Qatar will support four UNESCO education projects in Iraq focusing on Curriculum Review, Support to Higher Education, a Literacy Campaign and Teacher Training. These areas of activity were identified during the Stop Jeopardizing the Future of Iraq conference held in Paris at UNESCO headquarters under Her Highness’ auspices last fall.

In addition to his meetings with the Prime Minister, the Director General spoke by telephone with President Jalal Talabani and with the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Masoud Barzani. The Director General also visited the Iraq National Museum, which will soon reopen to the public following a UNESCO supported restoration that included capacity building and equipment for the museum’s laboratories, which were looted and destroyed in March 2003.

The focus on education continued later in the day when the Director General and Her Highness had a lively discussion with several university students and academics, which focused on the need for improved pedagogy, access to new technologies like computers and connections to the internet, and scholarships for

opportunities to study abroad. The emphasis on ICTs mirrored part of the discussion held with line ministries at the office of the Prime Minister, which included the Ministries of Culture, Higher Education, Education, and Science and Technology.

UNESCO's work in the areas of education, culture and preservation were highlighted in a meeting with several ambassadors and representatives of foreign governments who sat with the Director General to privately express their interest of working cooperatively with UNESCO. The ambassadors for the United States, Great Britain and Japan were present along with officials from France, Italy and the European Commission.

Mohamed Djelid, director of the Iraq office, applauded the spirit of cooperation and support that will benefit the Iraqi people for years to come. "These activities in education and culture are investments in the future of Iraq because our work is about developing local capacity and building awareness and understanding," Djelid said.

The Director General took the occasion of his visit to announce that UNESCO will establish a permanent presence in Iraq with the appointment of a representative to be based in Baghdad. Mr. Matsuura's visit to Baghdad was organized in close cooperation with the Special Representative of the Secretary General and head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, Staffan de Mistura, and the UNAMI staff. The SRSG accompanied the Director General throughout the visit for which he was thankful.

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