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Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,

Director-General of UNESCO,

on the occasion of

International Day against Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Property

14 November 2020

On 14 November 1970, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

Fifty years to the day, we are celebrating the first International Day against Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Property, adopted unanimously by UNESCO's 193 Member States.

This Day is an opportunity to take stock of the progress made possible by this decisive text, which has led to the strengthening of international cooperation, encouraged the restitution of property, and prompted the adoption of other texts such as the UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects.

Fifty years on, however, new challenges lie ahead, starting with the large-scale looting of archaeological sites in conflict zones, recently exacerbated by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Indeed, by affecting the monitoring of archaeological sites, the pandemic has led to a tangible increase in trafficking.

Fifty years on, there is also a digital challenge that needs to be met, as trafficking is increasingly branching out online.

It must be unequivocally reaffirmed, however, that illicit trafficking in cultural property does not only finance mafia and terrorist organizations; by depriving peoples of their heritage and history, and by hindering scientific and archaeological work, often irremediably, art traffickers destroy heritage.

This fiftieth anniversary is therefore an opportunity to significantly strengthen the fight against this growing phenomenon.

In keeping with its historic role, UNESCO will naturally play its full part in this. First, through continued support to our Member States by helping to improve national legislation, promoting international cooperation, training culture and customs professionals, and providing technical expertise.

It is also necessary, however, to address the general public, and more precisely the potential buyers of looted works, as there is no supply without demand. To that end, UNESCO has recently launched a major communication campaign entitled “The Real Price of Art”.

To build on these efforts, there are several avenues to be pursued, including the wider adoption of certificates of provenance, the creation of specialized forces by the Member States, and the reinforcement of monitoring on the Internet.

UNESCO is now ready to support all initiatives in this respect, in collaboration with all its partners, including the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), International Council of Museums (ICOM), the World Customs Organization (WCO), the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT), the Italian Carabinieri and many others.

On this International Day, UNESCO therefore calls upon everyone to realize that stealing, selling or buying a looted work is tantamount to participating in pillaging peoples’ heritage and robbing their memories.