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UNESCO

Background Papers



Colegio Americano de Torreón Model United Nations (CATMUN)

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

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Committee Background

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations. The UNESCO was founded in 1945 at the occasion of a United Nations Conference for the establishment of an educational and cultural organization. The Constitution of UNESCO, signed on 16 November 1945, came into force on 4 November 1946 after ratification by twenty countries. Today, the UNESCO is composed of 195 Member States and ten associate members.

According to its Constitution, the purpose of the Organization is: "to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations"

I. Safeguarding cultural heritage in conflict zones

History

The protection and promotion of Culture is considered by the UNESCO as a fundamental pillar of its goal towards the establishment of Peace. The notion of Cultural heritage can be broadly defined as “pieces of cultural expression or information inherited from the past of mankind”, and will be legally defined later in this document. The protection of such heritage is considered as a key mission of the UNESCO. The protection of these sites must be conciliated with the needs for economic, touristic, urban and social development that are also core issues for the UNESCO and its member states.

The issue of protection of cultural heritage is even more difficult to be dealt with in time of conflict, given the instability and destruction that come with conflicts. The core point of discussion in this topic should be the protection of tangible cultural considering the fact that intangible cultural heritage such as artistic performances is less threatened by conflict, being less subject to irreparable damages. Tangible cultural heritage, as Cultural sites or artefacts, on the other hand, are subject to a certain number of grave and beyond repair damages during conflicts, due to direct effects of the conflicts, such as destructions caused by weapons, which have come to be more destructive than ever with the systematic use of shelling in modern conflicts. Irreparable damages are also caused by an indirect effect of conflicts: the instability of states and territories is a fertile ground for the looting of cultural sites, which results in irreparable damages to such cultural properties.

The International legislation regarding the issue of protection of cultural property in time of conflict is mainly stated in The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954. It is strongly advised for each delegate to read the integral convention in order to get a global legal knowledge of the topic.

Various UNESCO acts and decisions have created special statuses that provide special protection to a certain number of categories of cultural properties. For example, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972);, adopted in Paris from 17 October to 21 November 1972, by the UNESCO at its seventeenth session, which came into force on the 17th of December 1975 and is currently ratified by 192 states has established the World Heritage List, that offers special protection to sites that are of “outstanding universal value “and meet one out of 10 criteria set by the Convention.

As mentioned previously, cultural properties are also threatened by the illicit looting of works of art. Such lootings are prohibited by a certain number of International Conventions, including The Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970) and the UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (1995).

Current Situation

Since 2011, Syria is entangled in a civil war conflict that –according to the United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria– has killed approximately 400,000 people.

With its rich and ancient multi-cultural history, Syria has an incredibly rich and various cultural and architectural heritage. This heritage includes architectural sites from the Antiquity (byzantine and roman period mostly), and also an important

number of sites for the history of Christianity and Islam. There are 6 sites in Syria that are inscribed in the World Heritage list.

The Syrian Civil War that rages in the country currently has been the theatre of operations of the systematic use of shelling by all parties to the conflict, including the use of shelling over sites of important cultural value, such as the city of Aleppo. Furthermore, this war has also been an occasion for the world to witness intentional vandalizing of high cultural value site. It also seems important to mention the systematic destruction and looting of major cultural sites such as the city of Palmyra by some parties to the conflict

According to the Observatory of Syrian culture, there is evidence that the World Heritage properties have been and are being used for military purposes, and subjected to direct shelling and targeted explosions, as well as extensive illicit excavations, construction violations and temporary human occupation. In many cases, local Syrian communities are playing an important role in efforts to protect their cultural heritage and fight illegal excavations. All six sites in Syria that are on the World Heritage List have suffered damages during the conflict.

Conclusion

The UNESCO, with the financial support of the European Union, created in 2014 the Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage. It is based in UNESCO office in Beirut, Lebanon. This organ aims at raising international awareness over the question of the destruction of Syrian cultural heritage and gathering the effort of the various state, non-state and international actors that since the beginning of the conflict, are trying to monitor, prevent and stop this disaster.

UNESCO is implementing a three-part approach in order to fulfil these goals, by actions such as:

- Monitoring and assessing the cultural heritage situation in Syria through updated and continued knowledge and documentation shared by UNESCO, its partners and all stakeholders involved in safeguarding Syria's cultural heritage, which are widely disseminated on the Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage.
- Mitigating the destruction and loss of Syrian cultural heritage through national and international awareness-raising efforts.
- Protecting and safeguarding Syrian cultural heritage through enhanced technical assistance and capacity-building for national stakeholders and beneficiaries.

The UNESCO initiative has yet not permitted to fully protect important Syrian sites from destruction during the current conflict.

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II. Promoting the Safety of Journalists

History

It is important to not only understand the situation of reporters in war zones, but also those that are targeted during peacetime, often within their own country. The International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) plays an important role in monitoring the safety of journalists and in preserving the legal conduits that allow action to be taken against those who perpetrate crimes against them. A recent report presented to the IPDC Council at its 27th session in March 2010 looked at the 2008-2009 biennium. The report showed that in these two years UNESCO condemned the murder of 123 journalists; however, during this time the percentage of killings not linked to conflict situations dramatically increased, and at least 80% of these deaths were due to an attack that specifically targeted the victim.

A startling conclusion was reached that “The great majority of casualties in 2008-2009 were not international war correspondents but local journalists working in their own countries, mostly in peacetime, covering local stories.” These recent developments necessitate a shift in the thought process and approach of this committee. Not only must we consider the safety of those threatened by conventional war, but also those targeted by terrorism, gang violence, government corruption and other internal crimes that characterize modern day violence.

Current Situation

The International News Safety Institute (INSI) is a non-profit organization that offers training and important information related to journalist safety in dangerous situations. In March 2007, it released a well researched and in depth report titled *Killing the Messenger*. In the report, INSI's statistics suggest that Russia, the Philippines, and

Mexico are three countries where violence against reporters is prevalent; these cases are not directly associated with an ongoing conflict between sovereign parties, or with an intra-state conflict. For instance, journalists killed in these countries have typically been working on stories about corruption, drug trafficking and other criminal affairs. In a different situation, Colombia and Algeria face the problem of journalist killings that result from conflict among one or more internal armed resistant groups.

In these countries where there is not an ongoing war, it is important to pinpoint exactly what type of violence and discrimination journalists' face, in order to develop the most applicable framework for addressing these problems. In Mexico, drug cartels and corrupt police constitute the greatest threats to media; an unfriendly legal environment only compounds these issues. Recently, Mexico has made great strides in attempting to reform its legal system and facilitate investigations into any crimes that are committed. There are other some countries where the government has not shown the same willingness to fix existing problems, and in fact acts in direct defiance of the rights of journalists and other media personnel. Russia is a particularly strong example. Freedom House, an NGO dedicated to supporting the growth of freedom in the world, stated that in Russia in 2005, "although the constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, the Kremlin, having secured the country's main national television networks-Channel One, RTR, and NTV-and most radio stations, limits these rights in practice."

Delegates must understand the limitations upon the international community in dealing with these cases, and the importance of preserving the integrity of national sovereignty in any resolutions passed. However, the importance of international public pressure should not be underestimated and has proven successful in the past when pushing for greater protection for media workers.

Conclusion

UNESCO's focus on protecting journalists should involve promoting free speech. In turn, this committee should avoid any legal or political solutions, instead focusing on social implications and other cultural efforts.

UNESCO has always been a public advocate for free speech and the importance of journalism and the media. This topic speaks directly to that, as the fields would not exist without journalists to research, write, and convey information to the general public. Using the guidelines that UNESCO established in the 2013 UN Plan for the Safety of Journalists and Issue of Impunity, committee members must try to develop innovative and reasonable programs and safety measures to promote journalism as a profession without making journalists a further target in the eyes of the governments and extremists groups that disagree with their stories and rhetoric.

Overall, this committee is responsible for promoting free speech—with this knowledge, it is vital that members keep this priority in mind. Taking a social approach, it is important that this committee promotes journalism as a field and upholds the values of freedom of press and speech.

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