UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANISATION

AGENDA: Protection and Restoration of Heritage Sites in Conflict Zones

LETTER FROM EXECUTIVE BOARD

Greetings Delegates

It is a distinct privilege to welcome you to the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**. We look forward with great optimism to engaging in the challenging and critical work before the Committee. We want you to know that creativity, effective communication and confidence is what we desire to see. This committee provides a unique occasion for delegates to unite and discuss vital issues regarding cultural preservation, rescue, and restoration of heritage sites in conflict zones.

Consider this guide as your initial roadmap, but do not restrict your preparation to its contents. Make sure to execute an abundant amount of analysis which will help you to enlarge your groundwork and knowledge. Record your country's solutions, initiatives to be taken and vision; keep in mind your country's relationship with other member states.

Lastly, confidence is the key to success. We encourage you to speak as much as possible, communication will not only help you to raise your voice but at the same time assist you to understand different perspectives for critical issues. Feel free to ask any queries to the executive board.

Anticipating for a delightful debate session!

Warmest Regards

The Executive Board

THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

Abhinav Varma

CHAIRPERSON

+91 85120 06626

abhinav20809@gmail.com

Ridhima Sharma

CHAIRPERSON

+91 98106 48957

ridhisha.09@gmail.com

Yuvraj Khurana

VICE-CHAIRPERSON

+91 9810746062

yuvrajkhurana0108@gmail.com

Aabheri Dey

RAPPORTEUR

+91 8799726482

aabheridey@gmail.com

Pratyay Debroy

RAPPORTEUR

+91 99101 08419

debroypratyay@gmail.com

Committee Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations, established on 16 November 1945 after World War II. UNESCO's goal is to promote international cooperation through education, science, culture, and communication to foster peace, sustainable development and respect for human rights. Headquartered in Paris, France, UNESCO has 194 member states and 12 associate members, showcasing its global reach. UNESCO's aim is to protect people's history and values to foster trust and avoid conflict among nations.

UNESCO's work is guided by 5 major programs:

● *Education:* Promoting quality education for all and lifelong learning as a fundamental human right. UNESCO leads the global Education 2030 Agenda through SDG 4.

● *Natural Sciences:* Encouraging scientific research and knowledge sharing to address global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and the sustainable management of natural resources.

● *Social and Human Sciences:* Fostering ethical frameworks, social inclusion, and youth empowerment to ensure peaceful and just societies.

● *Culture:* Safeguarding the world's tangible and intangible cultural heritage, promoting cultural diversity, and strengthening creative industries as drivers of sustainable development.

● *Communication and Information:* Upholding freedom of expression, press freedom, and universal access to information, both online and offline.

UNESCO administers several key conventions and programs, such as:

1. 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

2. 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict: The first international treaty dedicated exclusively to protecting cultural property during warfare.

3. The Second Protocol to the Hague Convention (1999) further strengthened preventive and punitive measures, introducing the concept of "enhanced protection" for heritage sites of greatest importance to humanity.

UNESCO is also known for its global initiatives, such as the World Heritage Convention, which protects over 1,100 sites of outstanding cultural and natural significance, and the Man and the Biosphere Programme, which promotes harmony between people and

their environment. It also plays a pivotal role in coordinating international responses to crises that threaten education, culture, and scientific development.

Proofs and Evidence accepted in the Committee:

● *Official UNESCO and UN Documents:* Primary sources being UNESCO's Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (2023), State of Conservation Reports, World Heritage Committee Decisions, and UNESCO Emergency Response Mission Reports.

● *International Legal Instruments/Conventions:* UNESCO operates under the framework of international conventions, notably the 1954 Hague Convention and its 1999 Second Protocol, as well as the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Proof of a country's ratification, implementation, or violation of these conventions serves as legally binding evidence.

● *National Legislation and Institutional Framework:* Evidence in the form of domestic heritage laws, emergency management protocols, or cultural property protection agencies demonstrates a state's compliance with UNESCO's legal expectations. Delegates should cite laws by title, enactment year, and issuing authority.

● *Academic and Peer Reviewed Sources:* These may include research articles, UNESCO Chair publications, and reports from professional bodies such as ICOMOS or ICCROM. These sources are recognized by UNESCO for providing independent verification.

● *Verified Media Reports:* Data from globally recognised media organisations such as BBC, Associated Press, Reuters, etc. may be used to reference real time developments if supported by other credible or UN sources.

Criteria for accepting evidence

UNESCO evaluates all documentation based on 4 fundamental principles:

● *Authenticity* – The evidence must confirm that heritage elements, materials, and design are original or accurately reconstructed from documented sources.

● *Integrity* – Proof must demonstrate that the site's structure, boundaries, and cultural value remain intact or recoverable.

● *Protection and Management* – States must provide evidence of effective legal, administrative, and community-based protection mechanisms.

● *Documentation and Traceability* – All data, including photos or maps, must be traceable to identifiable authors, dates, and sources.

Unacceptable or Insufficient sources of Evidence:

● AI sources such as ChatGPT, Meta AI, etc.

● Unverified online content such as Wikipedia, Reddit, etc.

● Opinion pieces without factual or institutional backing.

● Xinhua news Agency (PR of China)

Basic Guide on how to research

Use the **background guide as a starting point** but quickly expand your scope. Break down the agenda topic into key concepts. Researching for the agenda accordingly requires focusing on vast terms. Analyse and research about terms like **"protection and restoration", "heritage sites" and "conflict zones."** Make sure to add statistics and other evidence to support your statements and conclusions.

To understand a specific law or a document make sure to acknowledge the reason why this law/document exists and its importance. The contents of the document need not be memorized, but you should know what the document has to say in various situations that may arise in the committee.

It is thoroughly recommended to perceive and jot down your country-based policies, initiatives, solutions and strategies towards the critical issue. Resolutions already addressed and followed up by your country and reports from relevant international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which offer instrumental policies should be highlighted.

Additionally, inspect if your country has domestic laws, policies, or ministry programs related to the agenda. It should be noted that your speech should focus more on the resolutions than towards the problem. You are free to look at all types of sources for your reference or preparation to understand the agenda better. However, it is advised that you verify your research from a credible source. Some of them are as follows: -

1. https://www.reuters.com/

2. State operated News Agencies– These reports can be used in the support of or against the State owns the News Agency.

3. Government Reports: The EB recognises news from government reports as credible.

4. Government Websites like the State Department of the United States of America (http://www.state.gov/index.htm)

5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of various nations like India (http://www.mea.gov.in) People 's Republic of China (http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/)

6. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

Website: www.saarc-sec.org

7. United Nations and Affiliated Bodies

All reports or documents from the United Nations, its organs or affiliated

bodies may be considered as a credible source of information. Website:

Organs such as,

● UN Security Council - https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en

● UNGA www.un.org/en/ga/

● UN Affiliated bodies such as,

The World Bank (WB) www.worldbank.org

Basic Introduction to the Agenda

Agenda: Protection and Restoration of Heritage Sites in Conflict Zones

To understand better, we will tackle the agenda in parts, while also discussing the scope of our agency, UNESCO, to deal with an agenda of this kind in the first place.

Cultural heritage represents the history, identity, and shared values of humanity. Heritage sites such as monuments, temples and museums connect generations. However, during times of war and conflict, these sites often face severe threats such as intentional destruction, looting, neglect, or damage. Protecting and restoring them has therefore become a global priority.

In many cases, heritage sites are destroyed not only for military purposes but also to erase cultural identity and history. For example, **extremist groups in Mali demolished the ancient mausoleums of Timbuktu in 2012, while the historic city of Aleppo in Syria suffered massive damage during the civil war**. More recently, the ongoing war in Ukraine has damaged hundreds of cultural and historical sites.

To address these challenges, UNESCO and the international community have established conventions and initiatives to safeguard heritage during conflicts. **The 1954 Hague Convention and its 1999 Second Protocol provide legal protection for cultural property in armed conflict, while the 1972 World Heritage Convention works to identify and protect sites of universal value. UNESCO's initiatives,**

such as **"Unite4Heritage"** and **"Revive the Spirit of Mosul,"** focus on emergency response, reconstruction, and community involvement in rebuilding cultural landmarks.

Despite these efforts, the protection and restoration of heritage in conflict zones are complex tasks. Ongoing violence, political instability, and lack of funding often delay recovery. Moreover, debates arise over how much a damaged site should be reconstructed whether to rebuild it as it once was or preserve its ruins as a reminder of history.

Cultural heritage stands as the living memory of humanity, embodying the history, identity, and values of civilizations across time. In regions affected by war, terrorism, and political unrest, these irreplaceable treasures—both tangible, such as monuments and archaeological sites, and intangible, such as traditions and collective identity—are increasingly at risk. The deliberate targeting and destruction of cultural sites, seen in conflicts across Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Ukraine, represent attempts to erase identity and heritage, a tragic form of cultural cleansing. **UNESCO**, as the leading international body for cultural preservation, plays a crucial role in safeguarding and restoring heritage through mechanisms like the **1954 Hague Convention** and the **Blue Shield Programme**. Strengthening international cooperation, advancing restoration efforts, and empowering local communities remain essential steps to ensure that cultural heritage continues to inspire peace, unity, and resilience even in the aftermath of conflict.

The Birth of Cultural Protection

Before the 19th century, protecting cultural sites during war was rare. Conquerors often destroyed temples, libraries, and monuments to demonstrate power or erase the identity of the defeated. The sacking of cities like **Constantinople (1204)** and **Baghdad (1258)** led to immense cultural loss, including irreplaceable manuscripts and works of art.

The massive destruction of cities such as Warsaw, Dresden, and Monte Cassino showed the vulnerability of cultural heritage. In response, UNESCO was founded in 1945 to promote education, culture, and peace. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict became the first international treaty devoted solely to safeguarding heritage in war zones.

Many conflicts, from Vietnam to the Balkans, saw the systematic targeting of cultural symbols. The 1990s Balkan Wars highlighted **"cultural cleansing,"** where mosques, libraries, and churches were destroyed to erase multiethnic histories. This led to stronger international efforts: the 1999 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention and the involvement of bodies like UNESCO and the International Criminal Court (ICC), which began to recognize cultural destruction as a war crime.

The deliberate demolition of Palmyra in Syria by ISIS and the looting of the National Museum of Iraq (2003) revived global outrage. Organizations such as ICOMOS, Blue Shield International, and UN peacekeeping missions began integrating heritage protection into their operations. Digital technologies — 3D scanning, photogrammetry, and satellite imaging — now aid in documentation and post-conflict restoration.

International Legal Framework for Heritage Protection

1. **1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict**

The 1954 Hague Convention is the first treaty dedicated to protecting cultural property during armed conflict. Adopted after World War II, it requires parties to take measures in peacetime to safeguard cultural heritage and to refrain from using cultural sites for military purposes. It was developed to address the significant damage cultural property had suffered in previous conflicts and the increasing threat of destruction due to advancements in warfare techniques. The convention recognizes that damage to cultural property harms the cultural heritage of all mankind, as each people contributes to the world's culture.

Key provisions and regulations

The 1954 Hague Convention, along with its Protocols of 1954 and 1999, is considered the most crucial legal document for cultural property protection during armed conflict. It regulates the behaviour of nations during war and military occupation to create a formal system for protecting monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other cultural sites. The convention also outlines circumstances under which the destruction of cultural property is permissible.

Definition of Cultural Property

Article 1 of the Convention defines cultural property as "movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people". This includes:

Monuments: Such as architectural, artistic, or historical monuments, whether religious or secular.

Archaeological Sites: Important locations for historical and cultural preservation.

Artistic and Historical Objects: Works of art, manuscripts, books, and other items of artistic, historical, or archaeological interest.

Collections: Scientific collections and important collections of books, archives, or reproductions of the aforementioned property.

Buildings for Preservation: Buildings whose main purpose is to preserve or exhibit movable cultural property, such as museums, large libraries, depositories of archives, and refuges intended to shelter cultural property during armed conflict.

Centres Containing Monuments: Areas with a significant concentration of cultural property.

Protection Mechanisms

The convention outlines several measures for the protection of cultural property:

Safeguarding: High Contracting Parties are obliged to prepare in peacetime for the safeguarding of cultural property within their territory against the foreseeable effects of armed conflict.

Respect: Parties must respect cultural property by refraining from using it or its immediate surroundings for purposes that could expose it to destruction or damage during armed conflict. They must also refrain from acts of hostility directed against such property. This obligation can only be waived if military necessity imperatively requires it.

Prohibition of Illicit Acts: The convention prohibits theft, pillage, misappropriation, and acts of vandalism against cultural property. It also forbids requisitioning movable cultural property located in the territory of another High Contracting Party.

2. **1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property**

The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property is a pioneering international treaty aimed at combating the illegal trade of cultural items. Adopted on November 14, 1970, and entering into force on April 24, 1972, this convention requires States Parties to take measures to prohibit and prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural property. It emphasizes the return and restitution of cultural property to safeguard the identity of peoples and promote peaceful societies.

Key Provisions and Pillars

The 1970 Convention is structured around three main pillars: preventive measures, restitution provisions, and international cooperation.

Definition of Cultural Property

Under the Convention, cultural property is protected if it is specifically designated by each State as being of importance for archaeology, prehistory, history, literature, art, or science. Each state can define its own cultural property, provided it is an item of

importance and falls within the categories defined in Article I of the Convention. These categories include:

Rare collections: Specimens of fauna, flora, minerals, and anatomy, and objects of paleontological interest.

Historical property: Items related to history, including scientific, technological, military, and social history, lives of national leaders, thinkers, scientists, artists, and events of national importance.

Archaeological items: Products of archaeological excavations (both regular and clandestine) or discoveries.

Dismembered elements: Parts of artistic or historical monuments or archaeological sites that have been separated.

Antiquities: Objects over one hundred years old, such as inscriptions, coins, and engraved seals.

Ethnological objects: Items of ethnological interest.

Artistic property: Pictures, paintings, drawings, original sculptures, engravings, prints, lithographs, and artistic assemblages or montages.

Restitution Provisions

The Convention provides for the return and restitution of cultural property. The State Party of origin can request other States Parties to take steps to recover and return cultural property imported after the Convention came into effect for both states.

Stolen Objects: For objects stolen from a museum, public or religious monument, or similar institution and documented in its inventory, Article 7, paragraph (b)(ii) mandates States Parties to seize and return the stolen and imported cultural property. The requesting state must pay just

compensation to an innocent purchaser or a person with valid title and provide necessary documentation.

Other Cases: For cases not falling under these provisions, such as objects stolen from private property or from illicit excavations, bilateral negotiations between States are encouraged under Article 9. The UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee (ICPRCP) can facilitate these negotiations.

Indefeasible Right: States Parties recognize the indefeasible right of each State to classify certain cultural property as inalienable, thus preventing its export, and to facilitate its recovery if exported.

International Cooperation

Concerted International Operations: Article 9 commits States Parties to participate in concerted international operations when cultural patrimony is endangered by pillage, including control of exports, imports, and international trade.

Bilateral Treaties: The Convention provides for negotiating bilateral treaties as a framework for more specific actions.

Supplementary Instruments: UNESCO requested the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT) to address private law issues not directly covered by the 1970 Convention. This led to the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, which supplements the 1970 Convention by providing legal rules to reinforce its efforts and resolve technical problems arising from differing national laws in international art trade.

Ratification and Statutory Bodies

As of March 2025, the 1970 Convention has been ratified by 147 states. Ratification by countries that are or have been hubs for illicit trafficking is seen as crucial for joint efforts to combat this crime. The Convention entered into force on April 24, 1972.

Several statutory bodies oversee the execution of the Convention's goals:

Meeting of States Parties: The sovereign body that organizes strategies and action plans for implementation.

Subsidiary Committee: Composed of 18 members, it promotes the Convention, reviews progress, informs the Meeting of States Parties, and identifies key problems.

UNESCO Secretariat: Assists the Meetings of States Parties by organizing meetings and developing resources and materials.

UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee (ICPRCP): Provides assistance in recovering cultural property falling outside the Convention's scope, serves as an advisory body, and manages the International Fund for the Return of Cultural Property.

Ideological Motivations Behind Heritage Destruction

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage during conflicts is often driven by ideology, politics, and economics, not just by chance.

1. **Ideological and Religious Motivations:** Extremist or occupying groups often destroy heritage sites to erase cultural diversity, rewrite history, and assert dominance. This is a form of iconoclasm — eliminating symbols of the past or opposing identities.

Examples include:

ISIS in Mosul destroying ancient temples to impose its extremist ideology.

The Taliban in Afghanistan demolishing the Bamiyan Buddhas and the Swat Museum to enforce Sharia law.

The Bosnian War (1992–1995), where attacks on multiethnic heritage aimed to erase shared identities.

Such acts symbolize control and ideological purity while sending messages of power.

2. **Political and Nationalist Motivations**

Cultural destruction is also used as a political weapon to strengthen new regimes or delegitimize others.

For instance, in the Russian Ukrainian War, Russia's destruction of Ukrainian monuments, museums, and libraries seeks to undermine Ukrainian national identity and promote its own historical narrative.

3. **Weaponization of Heritage**

In modern warfare, both states and non-state actors use cultural destruction as a weapon — either to demoralize opponents or gain propaganda value. This is considered a war crime, since heritage embodies the memory and identity of humanity.

4. **Economic Motivations**

Economic gain plays a major role. Looting and the illegal trade in antiquities generate income for militant groups — often called "blood antiquities."

Looted artifacts from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have been sold on international markets to fund weapons and military operations.

Poverty and unemployment in conflict zones drive locals to participate in looting.

The high demand for stolen artifacts in wealthy countries fuels this cycle.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Syria – Rebuilding the Ancient City of Aleppo

Aleppo in Syria is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. For thousands of years, it was known for its beautiful mosques, colourful markets, and stone houses. But when war began in 2011, the city suffered terrible destruction. Many historic buildings in the Old City, including the famous Al-Madina Souk and the Great Mosque of Aleppo, were damaged or destroyed. Streets that were once full of life and trade became silent and broken.

To save what remained, UNESCO joined hands with Syrian experts, local builders, and international organizations to rebuild Aleppo's heritage. They started by carefully studying the ruins using 3D scanning and drone mapping. These technologies helped them understand how each building looked before the war. Local people were trained in traditional construction methods so they could rebuild using the same kinds of stones and materials that their ancestors used.

Restoration work focused not only on repairing buildings but also on bringing hope back to the people. Many residents who had fled the city returned to help rebuild their neighbourhoods. The reconstruction of Aleppo's souks, mosques, and houses created new jobs and restored a sense of pride. Today, Aleppo stands as a symbol of resilience. It shows the world that even after years of destruction, a city's spirit and history can be revived when people come together to protect their cultural heritage.

Case Study 2: Iraq – Reviving the Spirit of Mosul

Mosul, a historic city in Iraq, was known for its ancient streets, churches, and the beautiful Al-Nouri Mosque with its leaning minaret. However, during the war between 2014 and 2017, much of the Old City was reduced to rubble. Families lost their homes, and many landmarks that had stood for centuries were destroyed. The heart of Mosul, once full of life, was left in ruins.

In 2018, UNESCO launched a project called **"Revive the Spirit of Mosul."** The goal was not just to rebuild buildings but to rebuild the soul of the city. Supported by the United Arab Emirates and the European Union, this initiative brought together engineers, architects, and young people from Iraq. They were trained to restore historical sites like the Al-Nouri Mosque, Al-Tahera Church, and old houses using both traditional methods and new technologies.

The project created thousands of jobs and encouraged community participation. Women and students also joined the effort by learning heritage preservation skills. Schools and cultural centres were reopened, giving hope to children and families. The reconstruction of Mosul's landmarks became a symbol of unity between people of different religions and backgrounds.

Today, parts of Mosul's Old City are alive again, showing that when people protect their culture, they also protect their future. The city's recovery proves that heritage can be a powerful tool for peace, rebuilding, and national pride.

Case Study 3: Yemen – Protecting Historic Cities During Conflict

Yemen is home to some of the most stunning ancient cities in the world, such as Sana'a, Shibam, and Zabid. These cities are filled with tall mud-brick towers, carved wooden doors, and colourful stained-glass windows. Unfortunately, many of these treasures were damaged during years of war. Bombings, floods, and neglect caused buildings to crumble and families to flee their homes.

To protect Yemen's history, UNESCO launched a project called **"Cash for Work."** This program trained local youth and artisans to repair and restore historic houses and mosques using traditional building materials. Instead of bringing workers from abroad, the project empowered Yemenis themselves to rebuild their heritage. By doing so, they earned income to support their families while preserving their culture. More than 70 important buildings were saved from collapse, and hundreds of young people gained valuable construction skills.

These efforts also improved living conditions by fixing roads, restoring markets, and reopening public spaces. The restoration work helped people feel connected to their history, giving them strength and hope during the conflict.

Yemen's experience shows that saving cultural heritage is not only about old buildings. It is also about protecting people's identity, providing jobs, and building unity. Even in times of war, the past can become a source of courage for a better future.

Questions to Consider

1. What is a World Heritage Site and how does UNESCO decide which sites are included on the list?
2. How effective has the 1954 Hague Convention been in preventing the destruction of cultural property during recent conflicts such as in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine?
3. To what extent should cultural destruction be prosecuted as a war crime under the Internet
4. To what extent should cultural destruction be prosecuted as a war crime under the International Criminal Court (ICC)
5. Should UNESCO member states be required to allocate part of their defence budgets or peacekeeping missions to include cultural property protection units (like Blue Shield operations)?
6. How can reconstruction and restoration of heritage sites contribute to post-conflict peacebuilding, national identity, and reconciliation among divided communities?
7. How can local communities and youth populations in conflict-affected regions be trained and empowered to safeguard their own heritage despite political or security challenges?