

## PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

# UK must learn from Iraq War failure to protect cultural heritage, leading culture organisations urge

**London, UK – 17 February 2010.** Shortcomings in the UK's planning and implementation of the 2003 Iraq invasion and occupation led to a fundamental failure to protect Iraq's cultural property, according to evidence submitted to the Chilcot Inquiry by thirteen major heritage and culture organisations today.

The evidence highlights five main failures in the planning and implementation of the Coalition Forces' invasion and subsequent occupation, including the relative secrecy of pre-invasion planning and how proceeds from illicit trade in looted antiquities helped fund the insurgency.

The Government is being urged to take immediate action to ensure that such a cultural catastrophe cannot happen again. This should include ratifying as a matter of urgency the *1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* and its two Protocols of 1954 and 1999. The UK is now the most significant military power not to have ratified this convention.

The five main failures and lessons highlighted to the Inquiry in the written evidence are:

- The ineffectiveness, relative secrecy, informality and limited scope of the pre-invasion planning for heritage and culture and the failure to plan for the aftermath, despite the vociferous concerns of many national and international heritage bodies
- The extent and impact of looting, fuelling illicit trade in antiquities and the alarming evidence that some of the proceeds of such trade have been used to fund the insurgency
- How the evidence that failure to protect the Iraqi people's heritage resulted in serious problems for winning 'hearts and minds', making the job much harder
- The increasingly clear picture now available of the scale of the damage to sites, museums, libraries and archives and the lessons to be learned about the effect of removing existing administrative structures to manage heritage and culture
- The contrast between the Government's relatively rapid action to legislate on dealing in illicit antiquity and its ongoing failure 7 years on to ratify the *1954 Hague Convention* or put in place all the procedures and training needed to make it work

Summarising the heritage organisations' key concerns, Harry Reeves OBE, Secretary General of the UK National Commission for UNESCO said: "The lessons from the Iraq war and occupation clearly shows that the UK urgently needs to ratify the *1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* to ensure the armed forces receive appropriate cultural property awareness training in preparation for any future deployments."

The evidence was jointly submitted by the UK National Commission for UNESCO, British Academy, British Institute for the Study of Iraq, Council for British Archaeology, European Association of Archaeologists, Institute for Archaeologists, International Council on Monuments

and Sites UK, International Council of Museums UK, Museums Association, National Trust, Nautical Archaeology Society, Society of Antiquaries of London and the UK & Ireland Committee of the Blue Shield.

ENDS

**For a copy of the full evidence submitted to the Iraq Inquiry, or to arrange an interview, please contact Anne Breivik at the UK National Commission for UNESCO([www.unesco.org.uk](http://www.unesco.org.uk)) on +44 (0) 20 77 66 34 60 or [abreivik@unesco.org.uk](mailto:abreivik@unesco.org.uk).**

#### **Notes to Editors**

- *Some of the major instances of looting of cultural property in Iraq include the ransacking of the National Museum in Baghdad in April 2003, the National Library and Archive and all provincial museums. The National Library lost about **500 000 printed books and serials, including 5000 rare books.***
- ***The UK National Commission for UNESCO** is the focal point in the UK for UNESCO-related policies and activities. As an independent body, the UK National Commission brings together a network of nearly 250 experts from across the UK in the fields of education, culture, sciences and communication. Working closely in partnership with HM Government and UK civil society, the UK National Commission aims to provide expert advice to Government on UNESCO related matters, develop UK input into UNESCO policy-making and programme implementation, promote reforms within UNESCO, and encourage support in the UK for UNESCO's ideals and work.*
- ***The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict** was adopted at The Hague (Netherlands) in 1954 in the wake of massive destruction of cultural heritage during the Second World War and is the first international treaty with a world-wide vocation focusing exclusively on the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict.*

*The Convention covers immovable and movable cultural heritage, including monuments of architecture, art or history, archaeological sites, works of art, manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest, as well as scientific collections of all kinds regardless of their origin or ownership. The UK has not ratified the Convention nor either of its two Protocols. In December 2008, the UK National Commission voiced its concern when the Heritage Protection Bill, which would have allowed the UK to ratify the Convention and its two Protocols, was omitted from the Queen's Speech.*