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EKIN SNY MUN BACKGROUND GUIDE

Committee: UNESCO

Topic: Heritage Sites in Conflict Zones



ekinjmun@gmail.com



www.ekinjmun.org

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Welcome Speech/Letter from the Chairboard (NEW YORK)

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the 2025 EKin SNY Model United Nations Conference held in New York! We are pleased to introduce you to our committee, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This year's staff is: Chair James Israel Marcus, and Co-chairs Shahdukht Tapes and Derin Açikel. James is from Guyana but, he now lives in New York. He holds a bachelor's degree in International relations and Diplomacy and works as an intern at the United Nations, Department of Global Communications. Shahdukht is originally from Afghanistan. She holds a bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts & Sciences, majoring in Human Rights and minoring in European studies and Law from the American University of Central Asia. She is currently doing her second year Masters majoring in Human Rights and minoring in Digital and Data Studies at Binghamton University. Shahdukht is interested in this committee as she is committed to advocating for girls' educational rights in her country and promoting cultural preservation through education and advocacy. Derin is a high school student from Turkey with six years of MUN experience. She and has mostly chaired committees about human rights and historical conflicts.

The topic under discussion for UNESCO is Heritage Sites in Conflict Zones.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded on 16 November 1945. UNESCO offers opinions on issues of cultural, scientific, and educational importance, and promotes international cooperation among its Member States in the fields of education, science, culture, and communication. UNESCO is "working to create the conditions for genuine dialogue based upon respect for shared values and the dignity of each civilization and culture." UNESCO's mission is to contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development, and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication, and information.

UNESCO's main objectives include:

- Attaining quality education for all and lifelong learning
- Mobilizing science knowledge and policy for sustainable development
- Addressing emerging social and ethical challenges
- Fostering cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and a culture of peace
- Building inclusive knowledge societies through information and communication

The General Conference of UNESCO meets every two years and determines the policies and the main lines of work of the Organization.



Welcome Speech/Letter from the Chairboard (İZMİR)

Dear delegates,

I would like to welcome you to the 2025 EKIN JMUN Conference which will be held in İzmir! My name is Luna Sanem van Leeuwen, and it is an honor for me to serve as your Co-Chair in our committee, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). I am partially Dutch and was born in the Netherlands. My mother is Turkish, and since I was 3 years old, I have lived in several parts of Türkiye. I am currently studying Fashion and Design as a freshman at Ege University. I have been attending Model United Nations Conferences since January 2024, and I hope to be a great influence on you through my experience in diverse committees.



Introduction

Cultural heritage sites, such as ancient ruins, monuments, and religious landmarks, serve as irreplaceable symbols of human history and identity. Unfortunately, these sites often find themselves caught in the crossfire of armed conflict. From the ancient city of Aleppo in Syria to the temples of Timbuktu in Mali, heritage sites have suffered destruction, looting, and neglect during times of war. These losses diminish humanity's cultural fabric and erase entire civilizations' stories.

UNESCO, as the United Nations specialized agency for education, culture, and science, has long prioritized the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones. This involves implementing strategies to safeguard sites, documenting endangered heritage, and collaborating with governments to prevent further destruction. However, the task is fraught with challenges, including limited access to conflict zones, the intentional targeting of cultural sites, and inadequate resources.

Delegates in this committee are tasked with exploring the root causes of threats to heritage sites in conflict zones, assessing the effectiveness of international mechanisms, and proposing innovative solutions to preserve these treasures for future generations.



intro



Background

Rwanda has a long history, and because of its established dynamics in the pre-colonial era, Rwanda differs from most other sub-Saharan countries because its general boundaries were created by the established nation-state that existed before the colonial era, not by European colonial powers. Before colonization, Rwanda was a centralized monarchy led by Tusi kings who ruled through cattle chiefs, land chiefs, and military chiefs. Hutu-Tusi relations were carried out through a client-patron contract that allowed the Hutu to use the Tusi cattle in exchange for personal and military service, indenturing the Hutu to the Tusi chiefs. From 1894 to 1916, Rwanda was a part of German East Africa. In 1918, under the mandates system of the League of Nations, Belgium became the administering authority. During this time, Rwanda and Burundi were administered together as the territory of Ruanda-Urundi. Before independence, Rwanda was a monarchy largely ruled by Tutsi kings, a structure that German and Belgian colonial authorities adapted to their advantage.

Religious, Historical, and Traditional Sites

Religious, historical, and traditional sites represent the tangible markers of human civilization, reflecting the values, beliefs, and artistic achievements of different cultures. These sites often hold spiritual and emotional significance, serving as places of worship, cultural expression, and collective memory. In conflict zones, such landmarks are frequently targeted for destruction or looted for financial gain, disrupting cultural continuity and erasing shared histories. Examples include the destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria and the desecration of religious monuments in Afghanistan. Safeguarding these sites under international frameworks like the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property is essential to preserving humanity's diverse heritage amidst the chaos of war.



Intangible Cultural Heritage



Intangible cultural heritage encompasses practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills passed down through generations, such as oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and traditional craftsmanship. These elements of culture are vital for community identity and resilience, yet they face acute vulnerability during conflicts. War and displacement can lead to the fragmentation of communities, interrupting the transmission of cultural practices and threatening their survival. For instance, traditional songs, dances, and crafts may disappear as practitioners flee conflict zones. International efforts, including UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, aim to ensure that these living traditions are protected and promoted, even in times of turmoil.

Effects of Explosive Weapons on Cultural Heritage and Population



The use of explosive weapons in armed conflicts has devastating consequences for both cultural heritage and human populations. Direct strikes on cultural landmarks result in irreparable damage to architectural masterpieces, ancient artifacts, and sacred sites, as witnessed in Iraq and Yemen. Indirect effects, such as vibrations and structural weakening, further endanger heritage sites. Beyond physical destruction, these attacks displace populations, severing their ties to ancestral lands and cultural traditions. The loss of cultural heritage exacerbates the trauma of war, undermining recovery and reconciliation efforts. Strengthening compliance with international laws, such as the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, is critical to mitigating these impacts and fostering long-term cultural and social rehabilitation.



Intentional targeting of cultural sites

Intentionally targeting cultural sites is a deliberate act often used in conflict to erase a community's history, identity, and resilience. Such actions carried out for reasons ranging from ideological dominance to psychological warfare, constitute a violation of international law and are recognized as war crimes under the 1954 Hague Convention and its protocols. Examples include the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria. Beyond the immediate cultural loss, these acts inflict lasting harm on communities, severing ties to their heritage and disrupting social cohesion.

Organized looting of artifacts and cultural objects

During times of war and civil unrest, vulnerable communities often fall victim to organized and professional criminals who exploit these crises for financial gain. Armed with sophisticated networks and resources, these individuals orchestrate large-scale heists, targeting archaeological sites and museums to obtain valuable cultural artifacts. Iraq, for example, has witnessed significant losses of cultural heritage due to looting during armed conflicts, with numerous items stolen from the Iraq Museum. While a fraction of these artifacts have been recovered over time, nearly 10,000 remain missing and unrecovered.

The looting, destruction, and illicit trafficking of cultural property have escalated in recent years, with organized criminal groups utilizing online auctions, underground markets, and international networks to facilitate the sale of stolen items. This alarming trend has prompted governments and stakeholders to enhance international cooperation and implement more robust measures



under existing organized crime conventions. Strengthening crime prevention strategies has become a crucial priority to curb the illegal trade of cultural objects.

One of the most significant initiatives in the fight against cultural property trafficking is led by INTERPOL, the world's largest international police organization. INTERPOL has established a comprehensive database for stolen art and launched the mobile application "ID-Art." This innovative tool allows users to access descriptions and images of stolen artifacts, improving visibility and aiding in their identification and recovery. The app has revolutionized cooperation between law enforcement agencies, customs officials, and the public, making it easier to track and report stolen items. Accessible to police officers, private collectors, art dealers, journalists, and even students, the app aims to create a deterrent effect by complicating the sale of stolen cultural property.

Jean-Luc Martinez, President and Director of the Louvre Museum in Paris, has highlighted the critical role of illicit antiquities in funding terrorism. According to his research, the sale of "blood antiquities"—artifacts looted from conflict zones—accounts for nearly twenty percent of the revenue generated by terrorist organizations such as ISIS. These findings underscore the importance of tackling cultural heritage trafficking as part of broader efforts to combat terrorism financing, alongside measures targeting illicit oil trade and other sources of illegal revenue.



International Action

Both the United Nations as a whole and UNESCO specifically have established several treaties, conventions, and resolutions to address the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones. These measures recognize the profound cultural and historical significance of heritage sites and the need for their safeguarding during times of war and crisis.

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was the first international treaty focused on the protection of cultural heritage during conflicts. It obligates states to avoid targeting cultural property and take measures to safeguard and respect cultural heritage. The two additional Protocols (1954 and 1999) further strengthened its provisions by introducing measures for the restitution of cultural property and addressing responsibilities in non-international conflicts.

The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention emphasizes the preservation of cultural and natural heritage of “outstanding universal value.” It established the World Heritage List, which identifies sites requiring international cooperation and protection, particularly in conflict zones.



The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights the importance of preserving practices, traditions, and cultural expressions. It acknowledges that conflicts disrupt these traditions, necessitating measures to safeguard intangible heritage during crises. The UN Security Council’s Resolution 2347 (2017) marked a significant step in addressing the destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones. It called upon all Member States to enhance efforts to prevent and counter destruction, looting, and trafficking of cultural property.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has prosecuted war crimes involving the destruction of cultural heritage. For instance, the ICC convicted Al Mahdi in 2016 for the intentional destruction of cultural and religious monuments in Timbuktu, Mali, setting a precedent for accountability in cultural crimes.



Recommendations for Creating a Resolution

Delegates should consider the following approaches when drafting a resolution to address the protection of heritage sites in conflict zones:

- **Strengthening International Cooperation**

Propose ways for countries to work together to monitor and protect heritage sites, such as establishing joint task forces or regional agreements.

- **Funding and Resources**

Suggest mechanisms for increasing financial and technical support to UNESCO and other organizations, such as creating an international heritage protection fund.

- **Emergency Response Plans**

Recommend the development of rapid-response teams trained to secure and protect heritage sites during conflicts.

- **Raising Awareness**

Emphasize educational campaigns to highlight the importance of heritage preservation and foster a sense of global responsibility.

- **Technological Solutions**

Encourage the use of satellite imagery, 3D scanning, and digital archives to document and monitor endangered sites.

- **Legal Accountability**

Advocate for stronger enforcement of international laws and the prosecution of individuals or groups responsible for deliberate destruction.





FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1

UNESCO Website:

<https://www.unesco.org/en>

2

UNESCO's site on cultural heritage and armed conflicts:

<https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts>

3

UNESCO's World Heritage Centre:

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/>

4

Georgetown University's research on cultural heritage and conflict:

<https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/05/09/protecting-cultural-heritage-during-conflict/>

5

Statista's Analysis on where cultural heritage is in danger:

<https://www.statista.com/chart/30535/unesco-world-heritage-in-danger/>