UNESCO deplores damage to Aleppo National Museum; warns five Heritage Sites in Libya are in danger

14 July – The head of the United Nations cultural agency today deplored the recent shelling at the National Museum of Aleppo, located on the edge of the war-torn ancient city in northern Syria, calling once again for the destruction of cultural property to stop.

“The Old City of Aleppo has suffered extensive damage over the last four years. The destruction of the museum is a new blow to the heritage and history of all Syrians. I once again call on all parties to stop the violence and keep cultural heritage out of the conflict,” said Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

According to reports confirmed by the Syrian Directorate General for Antiquities and Museums, the National Museum was hit by mortar shells on 11 July, causing extensive damage to the roof and structure of the building.

Aleppo – Syria’s largest city – has been devastated by the ongoing conflict in the country, now in its sixth year and claiming the lives of more than a quarter of a million people. UNESCO, which, as the UN body responsible for identifying significant cultural landmarks, had classified the Ancient City of Aleppo among six World Heritage sites in Syria, launched a three-year action plan in August 2013 aimed at preventing further losses and repairing damage where and when possible, but all six of those sites are now either destroyed or severely damaged.

Ms. Bokova noted that the National Museum is the most important museum in Aleppo, with thousands of objects reflecting all periods of Syrian history, including an important Islamic section.
Most of the collections had been already evacuated by the Syrian Directorate General for Antiquities and Museums and taken to safe locations, but strong concerns remain for the items that could not be transported, she said.

Reiterating its calls on all parties to refrain from targeting as well as from using cultural property for military purposes, Ms. Bokova emphasized that UNESCO condemns all destruction of heritage since the outbreak of the conflict, no matter who the instigator.

UNESCO works with the Syrian Directorate General for Antiquities and Museums to safeguard Syria’s cultural heritage, through training of professionals, documentation and awareness-raising initiatives.

The Director-General said UNESCO is intensifying cooperation with non-governmental organizations, experts and institutions around the world and all across Syria, to protect Syrian heritage, building on the best of scientific expertise from all sides, in the spirit of the expert meeting held in Berlin on 2-4 June, in cooperation with Germany.

Located at the crossroads of several trade routes from the 2nd millennium B.C., Aleppo was ruled successively by the Hittites, Assyrians, Arabs, Mongols, Mamelukes and Ottomans. The 13th-century citadel, 12th-century Great Mosque and various 17th-century madrasas, palaces, caravanserais and hammams all form part of the city’s fabric.

The Ancient City of Aleppo – which was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 1986 – has been on the List of World Heritage in Danger since 2013. This status was confirmed by the 40th session of the World Heritage Committee, which is taking place in Istanbul from 10 to 20 July.

In other news today, the World Heritage Committee today placed the five World Heritage sites of Libya on the List of World Heritage in Danger, citing damage caused by the conflict affecting the country and the threat of further damage it poses.

The five sites are: the Archaeological Site of Cyrene, the Archaeological Site of Leptis Magna, the Archaeological Site of Sabratha, Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus and the Old Town of Ghadamès. All of the sites were inscribed on the World Heritage List in the 1980s.

The Committee in particular noted the high level of instability affecting the country and the fact that armed groups are present on these sites or in their immediate surroundings.

The Committee made the decision during its examination of the state of conservation of sites already inscribed on the World Heritage List.

The List of World Heritage in Danger is designed to inform the international community of conditions which threaten the very characteristics for which properties were inscribed on the World Heritage List and rally the support of the international community for their protection.
New UN-backed survey reveals ‘alarming’ damage to high seas and marine ecosystems

14 July – More than half of the world’s fragile coral reefs are under threat and most of our major fish stocks are now overexploited, according to the latest global assessments on the state of world’s high seas and large marine ecosystems launched today by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission.

The new study identified the increasing cumulative impacts of climate change and human activities on these systems for the deterioration of their health and decline of resource productivity.

“Sixty percent of the world’s coral reefs are currently threatened by local activities; 50 per cent of all fish stock in large marine ecosystems are overexploited; 64 of the world’s 66 large marine ecosystems have experienced ocean warming in the last decades,” are among the alarming statistics from the assessment and detailed in a statement from UNESCO.

The findings were released today at the Headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington D.C., in the framework of the Transboundary Waters Assessment Programme (TWAP), a project financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). The Programme undertook global assessments of the world’s transboundary water systems, including the open ocean and large marine ecosystems, in order to support national decision makers and international organizations set priorities for policy interventions and develop a framework for future periodic assessments.

The statement also noted that the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) released a suite of products from the TWAP data, including a full global assessment report and a more targeted version in summary form for policy makers.

“The findings from the open ocean and [large marine ecosystems] assessments present projections for disastrous escalation by 2030 and 2050 of the cumulative impacts of local and global hazards – from tourism to climate change – on marine ecosystems,” UNESCO said.

“The assessments nevertheless identify the important potential benefits of globally and regionally integrated governance to address these issues and should help strengthen countries’ capacities to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources.”

Highlighting the contributions of large marine ecosystems to socio-economic development and to human well-being, UNESCO said those ecosystems alone contribute an estimated $28 trillion annually to the global economy through services and benefits provided by nature, including fish for food and trade, tourism and recreation, coastal protection from flooding and erosion, and the less tangible benefits from cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic connections to nature.

“Maintaining the health and resource productivity of these transboundary water systems should help countries achieve global objectives to reduce poverty and hunger, and promote sustainable economic growth,” added the statement.

Some TWAP findings by the numbers:

Open Ocean:
60 per cent of the world’s coral reefs are currently threatened by local activities. 
90 per cent of all coral reefs could be threatened in 2030 by the combined pressures of local activities and climate change. 
100 international agreements currently “govern” the open ocean, signaling severe fragmentation.

Large Marine Ecosystems (LMEs):

- 64 of 66 LMEs have experienced ocean warming since 1957 (“Super-fast” warming in the Northwest / Northeast Atlantic and in Western Pacific).
- 28 per cent reduction in fish catch potential projected for high-risk LMEs in East Siberian Sea.
- 50 per cent of all fish stock in LMEs are overexploited.

UN report finds impunity for killings ‘remains rampant’ in Ukraine conflict

14 July – A new report by the United Nations human rights office released today describes widespread killings that have taken place in Ukraine since January 2014, concluding that very limited accountability has taken place.

The report, which was prepared by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, stated that the armed conflict in certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, “accounts for the majority of violations of the right to life in Ukraine over the last two years,” claiming up to 2,000 civilian lives, with nearly 90 per cent of conflict-related civilian deaths resulting from indiscriminate shelling of residential areas.

More than 9,300 people have been killed in Ukraine since the beginning of the separatist conflict in eastern regions of the country in mid-April 2014. The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission was deployed by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to the country in March 2014 upon the invitation of the Government of Ukraine.

Covering the period from January 2014 to May 2016, the report states that the killings are being “fuelled by the inflow of foreign fighters and weapons from the Russian Federation.” It concluded that no responsibility has been taken for any civilian deaths caused by the conduct of hostilities, and that some of the killings may amount to war crimes and/or crimes against humanity.

“Impunity for killings remains rampant, encouraging their perpetuation and undermining prospects for justice,” said the 20-page report, which includes an additional 31-page annex describing more than 60 specific cases, focusing mainly on cases of alleged killings of civilians, and people otherwise protected under international humanitarian law, in the conflict zone while no armed hostilities were taking place in the immediate vicinity of the incidents.

The report also found that significant numbers of people, including civilians, have also been summarily executed or have died in custody, with most such killings occurring in 2014 and early 2015.

Report notes ‘widespread lack of discipline’

According to the report, armed groups mainly executed individuals who had, or were believed to have, vocal “pro-unity” views or to support Ukrainian forces, while Ukrainian forces targeted people based on their alleged affiliation with, or support for, armed groups, or for their “separatist” or “pro-Russian” views.
Numerous allegations of executions of Ukrainian soldiers and elements of armed groups who had surrendered or were hors de combat were also reported, although the full scale of the phenomenon is hard to assess, the report found.

The report noted that there was a widespread lack of discipline in hastily assembled armed groups and within the Ukrainian forces, which included many rapidly mobilized soldiers and volunteer battalions. A significant number of people known to be criminals also joined one side or the other, and these factors led to “an unbridled rule of the gun with armed men readily resorting to violence towards civilians, especially to those who ‘disobeyed’ their orders.”

The Government of Ukraine has investigated and prosecuted some perpetrators of summary executions from its own ranks, although in some cases, investigations are slow or “protracted deliberately so that alleged perpetrators are provided with opportunities to escape justice,” according to the report.

Dozens of people have also died while in custody in the territories controlled by the armed groups. Allegations concerning the death of people in government custody have also been received, with most deaths allegedly caused by torture and ill-treatment, or by inadequate or lack of medical assistance.

The report also documented killings within the armed groups and government forces, including at least 121 cases of “intentional homicide” of Ukrainian servicemen, some of whom were whistle-blowers who revealed the misconduct of Ukrainian forces in the conflict zone. Armed groups have, in some cases, resorted to execution as a punishment for crimes or disciplinary acts for misconduct in their own ranks.

Report highlights large number of deaths during mass assemblies

In addition, the report highlighted the large number of deaths that occurred during mass assemblies, especially during the Maidan and Odessa events, for which it said that accountability has so far remained very limited.

As of 1 June, some 55 individuals have been charged in relation to the deaths of Maidan protestors, including ten senior Government officials and 29 former commanders and servicemen of the “Berkut” special police regiment.

However, the investigation into the killings of 13 law enforcement agents at Maidan has been hampered by a law that exempts all people who participated in mass protests, and are suspected or accused of crimes between 21 November 2013 and 28 February 2014, from criminal responsibility, according to the report, which recommended that the law be amended to allow prosecutions for all killings that took place during the Maidan.

The report also highlighted the violence that took place on 2 May 2014, in Odessa, during which 48 people died as a result of clashes between “pro-unity” and “pro-federalism” groups.

OHCHR “remains concerned that the authorities have still not taken appropriate measures to ensure effective investigations into the 2 May 2014 events, nor to protect the independence of the judiciary,” the report said.

Furthermore, the report found that the lack of accountability remains widespread in Ukraine, despite efforts by the Government to bring perpetrators from its own ranks to justice and the pre-trial investigations by the Office of the Chief Military Prosecutor into cases of killing, torture and ill-treatment by members of the armed groups of the self-proclaimed “Donetsk people’s republic” and self-proclaimed “Luhansk people’s republic.”

While acknowledging the challenges faced by the authorities in ensuring justice, including the lack of access to the territories where many of the alleged acts took place, the report noted “an apparent lack of motivation to investigate some cases … especially when it concerns acts allegedly committed by Ukrainian forces.”

“Accountability will be key to the establishment of sustainable peace in Ukraine, including in the eastern part of the country,” said Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“This is the only way forward, as has been fully and tragically demonstrated by the many countries which have not dealt properly with serious international crimes and human rights abuses, and as a result have sooner or later toppled back into
violence,” he added.

South Sudan: UNICEF delivers life-saving aid to civilians displaced by fighting in Juba

14 July – The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and partners are providing urgent life-saving assistance to thousands of people displaced by last weekend's heavy fighting in Juba, South Sudan, which reportedly killed some 272 people, including 33 civilians, and displaced at least 36,000 civilians.

“The people hit hardest by this fighting are struggling to cope in appalling conditions,” said Mahimbo Mdoe, UNICEF's Representative in South Sudan. “They are desperate for water, food and in need of medical assistance.”

Yesterday, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous told the Security Council that the fighting between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and those backing First Vice-President Riek Machar made the movement of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) difficult although the Mission was able to conduct limited patrolling.

Primary health care kits as well as recreational items for children will be distributed today. Yesterday, four trucks of supplies, including the treatment of malnutrition as well as sanitation items such as water containers and soap, were dispatched from UNICEF warehouses and taken to a UN displacement site in Juba as soon as movement became possible in the city. High-energy food bars were also distributed in two churches where families have gathered.

Teams from UNICEF and partners are also working to assess the extent of humanitarian needs and have begun family tracing for children who became separated from their parents as families fled the fighting. Plans are in place to assist up to 50,000 people affected by the conflict.

“We are responding and that response will continue to grow, but it is vital that we are able to reach everyone in need and for that we must have unrestricted humanitarian access,” said Mdoe.

Selecting the next UN Secretary-General: Informal briefings reopen

14 July – The latest candidate for the position of the next United Nations Secretary-General will be heard today, answering questions on how she would promote sustainable development, improve efforts to create peace, protect human rights, and deal with huge humanitarian catastrophes should they be selected to lead the 193-member Organization.

The current Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, is the eighth occupant of the Organization's 70-year history. He took office in January 2007 and will be ending his 10-year tenure on 31 December 2016.

Today, Christiana Figueres, of Costa Rica, will go before the General Assembly to present her vision statement, which addresses the challenges and opportunities facing the UN and the next Secretary-General, and to answer questions from the audience. Ms. Figueres was formerly the Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), a post she had held since 2010.
The informal briefings, mandated by the Assembly, began in April, when the initial nine candidates, presented their views to the global community in open dialogues. Two candidates put forward by their respective governments later in the spring were heard in early June.

Today’s informal hearings come just after the UN on Tuesday held its first-ever globally televised and webcast townhall-style debate in the General Assembly Hall, where 10 of the 12 confirmed candidates, including Ms. Figueres, took questions from diplomats and the public at large. The two candidates unable to attend the event in New York were invited to send video messages to be used in the event.

**Yaws and maternal and neonatal tetanus eliminated from India**

**– UN health agency**

*14 July* – The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) today announced the elimination of yaws, and maternal and neonatal tetanus, to India and hailed its public health achievements as examples to other countries.

“India’s focused approach on making maternal and newborn care accessible to all and addressing health care equity more generally has made these remarkable successes possible,” Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia Region, said in a statement after presenting certificates to India’s Minister of Health and Family Welfare Minister.

“These victories are not only India’s but all of humanity’s as the country accounts for approximately one-sixth of the world’s population,” she added.

Transmitted by skin contact, the disease affects mostly children between the ages of five and 15, and appears as multiple lesions which eat away at faces, arms and hands, and deepen to the bones, disfiguring the child. Yaws is closely linked to poverty and is part of a family of disabling disease that affect the skin – along with leprosy – preventing children from attending school and placing an undue economic burden on local communities.

In May, WHO certified India yaws-free after a team of experts verified interruption of disease transmission in the country. It is the first country under the 2012 WHO neglected tropical diseases roadmap to eliminate yaws, a disabling bacterial disease that results in severe disfigurement.

The agency described maternal and neonatal tetanus elimination (MNTE) as a “momentous public health feat,” as until a few decades ago the country reported 150,000 to 200,000 neonatal tetanus cases annually. Such tetanus cases are reduced to less than one case per 1,000 live births in all its 675 districts.

According to WHO, both yaws and maternal and neonatal tetanus eliminations were achieved using the existing health system and health workforce. It noted sustained political commitment and clear policies, unified strategies, close supervision and monitoring, efforts of the frontline workers, and invaluable support of partners, particularly for MNTE, as key factors for the achievement.

“Highly targeted awareness and early treatment campaigns in vulnerable communities enabled treatment of yaws cases and interruption of disease transmission,” Dr. Khetrapal Singh said.

Both achievements will not only improve the health of marginalized communities, but will also enhance their socio-economic status and contribute to India’s wider development, the Regional Director added.

WHO further noted that Indonesia was also validated for the elimination of maternal and neonatal tetanus in May this year.
With this, the agency said, the entire South-East Asia Region has achieved elimination of maternal and neonatal tetanus, becoming the second region, after European Region, to achieve the feat.

Indonesia and Timor-Leste are now the only remaining countries with yaws transmission in the South-East Asia Region.