**JOINT STATEMENT**

**on cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage**

Mr. President,

1. I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of a cross-regional core group comprising Brazil, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Greece, Iraq, Ireland, Mali, Poland, Serbiaand Switzerland. This statement has received the support of 145 countries.
2. Recalling the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, we underline the important role that the Human Rights Council can play, in concert with all other relevant international actors, in global efforts to protect cultural heritage, with a view to promoting universal respect for cultural rights by all.
3. As Members and Observers of the Human Rights Council, we condemn all acts of intentional destruction to cultural heritage occurring most commonly during, or in the aftermath of, armed conflicts around the World and we are alarmed by their increasing frequency and scale. We note that such acts and the violations and abuses of cultural rights they result in can constitute an aggravating factor in armed conflict and may also represent major obstacles to dialogue, peace and reconciliation, for instance when they interfere with the right to manifest one’s religion by limiting access to places of worship. Parties to armed conflicts must refrain from any unlawful military use or targeting of cultural property, in full respect of their obligations under international humanitarian law.
4. We are equally concerned by the organized looting, smuggling and illicit trafficking in cultural objects which violate or abuse cultural rights and breach relevant provisions of international law and which, in some current instances, generate funds for the financing of terrorism. We call for enhanced global cooperation in preventing and combating such illegal activities and in restoring the looted or trafficked cultural properties to their places of origin.
5. Against this backdrop, we welcome the decision of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Ms. Karima Bennoune, as expressed in her first report presented to the Council on 10 March 2016 (A/HRC/31/59), to consider as a matter of priority the detrimental impact of the destruction of cultural heritage on the enjoyment of cultural rights. We call on States to offer their full support to the Special Rapporteur in undertaking such activities under her mandate, including by inviting her to relevant country visits.
6. We are convinced of the need to identify innovative ways and best practices, at national, regional and/or international level, for the prevention of violations and abuses of cultural rights, as well as, in particular, for the prevention and mitigation of damage caused to cultural heritage in armed conflict. Raising awareness on the mutually reinforcing relation between the protection of cultural heritage and human rights and on the risks faced by defenders of cultural heritage is very important, particularly in this context.
7. Acknowledging the key role, respective competences and expertise of UNESCO and UNODC in international efforts to prevent and combat the damage or destruction, looting, smuggling and illicit trafficking of cultural heritage, we call for enhanced cooperation between them and the Human Rights Council, with a view to strengthening the implementation of the existing international legal framework.

1. Finally, we note with satisfaction the strong interest in the relevant side-event held during the High Level Segment of this Human Rights Council session and express our readiness to further explore the ideas that have been presented during its rich deliberations in taking this initiative forward.

A complete list of Member and non-Member Observer States that have supported the Joint Statement will be uploaded on the extranet.

I thank you.