OPENING STATEMENT

ON BEHALF OF THE CORE GROUP OF RESOLUTION A/HRC/RES/33/20

Thank you, Madame Chairperson, for giving me the opportunity to deliver this statement at the opening of the seminar, on behalf of the core group of resolution A/HRC/RES/33/20, comprising, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Iraq, Ireland, Mali, Serbia, Switzerland, Poland and my own country Greece.

Excellencies,

Distinguished panellists,

Dear participants,

At the outset, we would like to express the core group’s sincere appreciation to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the dedicated efforts which have gone into the organisation of this seminar, as mandated by the resolution A/HRC/RES/33/20 which was adopted unanimously by the Council at its 33rd session, last September.

The profound expertise of the panellists that have been assembled for this purpose, combined with the balanced agenda and the broad spectrum of participation, make us feel confident that this seminar will achieve its goal and will contribute further to the mainstreaming of cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage into the human rights agenda.

Destruction of cultural heritage, especially but not exclusively in the context of armed conflicts, is not a new phenomenon. Terrorism, wars, conflicts and upheavals in various parts of the globe since the turn of century, however, have brought about a marked increase in the number and frequency of incidents of unlawful damage, as well as a worrying growth in the scale of targeted destruction of cultural heritage monuments, artifacts and objects.

We need not refer you to the bleak news reports we find ourselves watching and reading about in the media only too regularly in recent years, which concern incidents of destruction to world heritage sites, religious and historical monuments, museums and mausoleums — all part of humanity’s cultural heritage, which needs to be preserved not only for the present generation, but for the future ones as well. The list of examples is already extensive and unfortunately it is getting longer every day. The cases we hear about concern only the most emblematic monuments. The full extent of destruction on a global scale is in fact, sadly, much greater.

Such incidents constitute a scourge of our times, an affront to civilization and a threat to the dignity and the values of humanity. Addressing them and, in particular the human rights violations and abuses which arise from them, has therefore become a global security necessity, as well as a peace-building imperative. A holistic approach is absolutely crucial and, within this context, the human rights perspective is a key aspect which has so far been overlooked and needs to be strengthened.

This was the main purpose of resolution A/HRC/RES/33/20, which aimed to highlight the detrimental impact on the exercise and enjoyment of cultural rights, caused by acts that damage or destroy cultural heritage.

The resolution unconditionally condemns all such unlawful acts and expresses deep concern at the organized looting, theft, smuggling and illicit trafficking in cultural property, which may even generate funds for the financing of terrorism in some instances, and acknowledges the importance of early restoration of the full enjoyment of cultural rights to individuals affected by conflict, and in particular to those who are displaced. It also invites the adoption of effective strategies by States aimed at preventing destruction and underlines the important role that the Council can play, in concert with all other relevant international actors, in global efforts to protect cultural heritage. It also underlines the important contribution made by cultural rights defenders involved in the protection of cultural heritage, whilst calling for the protection of their safety and encourages States to implement the recommendations contained in the Special Rapporteur’s reports to the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly.

Indeed, the decision of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights —whom we are very pleased to have with us today — to prioritise this issue in her first reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, has been instrumental in bringing the human rights dimension of the destruction of cultural heritage to the forefront. As such, we have warmly welcomed it and we encourage the Special Rapporteur to continue her important work in this area.

In light of the above, we are particularly pleased that this seminar has become a reality as we are convinced that it can act as a platform for a meaningful exchange of views and practices. We thank all stakeholders who are in the room for their participation and encourage them to engage in a positive and constructive manner. As a core group, we reaffirm our dedication to the issue and we look forward to the contributions that will be made in the course of the today’s deliberations. We wish everyone a successful and productive seminar.

I thank you.