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Please find below the statement made today by the Director-General at the launch of the internal Task Force on the Middle-East

**For a renewed and enhanced commitment of UNESCO in the Middle East
(Statement by the Director-General on the launch of the
Task Force on Reconstruction and Reconciliation)
4 June 2002**

At the present time, the terrible spiral of violence in the Middle East continues to dominate the international agenda. Profoundly alarmed by this situation, the international community is mobilised and is exercising all possible pressure and using all available means to help bring about a cessation of violence and a shift toward reconciliation in the Middle East. The solution most widely supported is that proposed in Resolution 1397, adopted by the UN Security Council on 12 March 2002, "affirming a vision of a region where two States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognised borders".

For my part, I have condemned terrorist attacks from any quarter and attacks on educational establishments, cultural heritage sites and communication structures. I have expressed deep concern about the escalation of violence, destruction and loss of human life, and have stressed the international implications of this crisis, including manifestations of anti-Semitism and racism, whether against individuals or institutions such as places of worship, in Europe and elsewhere. Nevertheless, I am confident that solutions can be found to ease, and eventually to transform, the current situation.

I have been in constant contact with the United Nations Secretary-General and with senior officials and representatives of the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority. In April 2002, I called upon both the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to do their utmost to prevent the irremediable destruction of the historic centres of Bethlehem, Hebron and Nablus. In May, I met with the Minister of Higher Education of the Palestinian Authority, who gave me an overview of the state of the education system in the wake of recent events.

Over the years, UNESCO has played an active part in the international community's efforts to help bring about a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

UNESCO's support for the Palestinian people dates back to the 1950s when the Organization, alongside UNRWA, established and maintained educational programmes. Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, this support has expanded and contributed to the creation of structures that can help to build a modern and democratic Palestinian society. In November 1993, UNESCO and the PLO signed a Memorandum of Cooperation and, since 1994, a joint UNESCO/Palestinian Authority Coordination Committee has worked to implement a special programme of assistance for Palestine. In April 2000, I had the honour

of launching the third phase of this programme. UNESCO's contribution is part of a broader United Nations effort to help the Palestinian people: we are working very closely with the United Nations Special Coordinator's Office in the Middle East and, within the Local Aid Coordination Committee, UNESCO has the responsibility for the working group in education. The Organization's contribution to the reconstruction of educational, scientific and cultural institutions, as well as to media development and the protection and rehabilitation of cultural heritage in the Palestinian territories, is widely recognised and highly appreciated. Activities like Bethlehem 2000, capacity-building for the Ministry of Education, and educational reform are part of this contribution.

True to its mandate, an essential aspect of UNESCO's action has been, and continues to be, the promotion of dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, subject of course, and all too tragically, to the situation on the ground. UNESCO honours reconciliation, dialogue, and tolerance every year on the anniversary of the death of Yitzhak Rabin with a ceremony at UNESCO's Yitzhak Rabin Square of Tolerance. Almost a decade has passed since UNESCO awarded the 1993 Felix Houphouet-Boigny Peace Prize to Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat. At the time, it was called a tribute to the exemplary initiative of the three leaders; it may also be seen as an encouragement to the communities they represent to take up the challenge of peace. The Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority accepted the historic challenge and signed a cooperation agreement in February 1998 as part of the Granada II process in the fields of education, culture, and science aimed at enabling Palestinians and Israelis to work together to build a future of peace. I personally experienced a sense of this positive and constructive atmosphere shortly after I became Director-General when I attended the midnight mass at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on 24 December 1999. To this day, I am moved by the memory of this event and by the spirit of hope and dialogue that then existed.

UNESCO has been called upon by its Executive Board, notably through two important decisions concerning the crisis in the Middle East and activities to be implemented with unspent "carry-over" funds, to respond to the present alarming situation. Thus, at the urging of the Organization's governing bodies and its Member States and within the framework of the UN system's concerted efforts in the region, I have decided to establish and chair an intersectoral Task Force on Reconstruction and Reconciliation in the Middle East, as described in my recently-issued instructions (Blue Note of 31 May 2002). Aimed in particular at meeting urgent needs in the Palestinian territories and helping to advance both reconstruction and reconciliation in the Middle East, the function of the Task Force will be to propose a strategic approach based on a coherent vision of UNESCO's role in the region, in close collaboration with the UN system and other partners. Our role is two-fold, focusing on both reconstruction and reconciliation. I want to make clear my commitment to treating emergency needs while simultaneously planning for the future.

Our immediate priority will be to meet the most urgent needs in the Palestinian Territories. Highest priority should be given to the pursuit of activities planned under the UNESCO/Palestinian Authority agreement, re-evaluation of the third phase of our assistance, and the preparation and implementation of projects for the reconstruction of Palestinian educational, scientific and cultural institutions to be financed under "carry-over" funds. Following initial exploratory missions to the Palestinian territories carried out by the International Institute for Educational Planning and the Sector for External Relations and Cooperation, I will also immediately dispatch various technical missions.

At the same time, I will do my best to mobilise financial resources to respond to the new challenges. All measures should be taken to strengthen UNESCO's advocacy role and action with regard to bilateral donors, UN system and other funds (European, Arab, etc.).

I will likewise strengthen UNESCO's presence in the field. UNESCO's Ramallah Office will be reinforced with new staff and secondments from Headquarters, so as to enhance its delivery capacity. At the same time, an increased number of consultants will be deployed to the Palestinian territories to help design and implement projects. This reinforced presence on the ground will help the Palestinian Authority, in these very difficult circumstances, in its work for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of infrastructure and the pursuit of educational reform.

The other equally important priority is reconciliation and creating an atmosphere of dialogue. Priority projects in the field of education, such as revision of curricula, and in the scientific field, such as SESAME and projects related to water issues, solve problems while bringing people together. When I took office in November 1999, the SESAME Synchrotron Project for Middle East-Wide Scientific Training and Research was not advancing well. In the belief that such projects can go a long way to enhancing scientific, technical and human capacities in the Middle East and to ensuring that more people can participate in the emerging knowledge societies, I have worked very hard to move this project forward.

Such projects should be seen as important tools for communication, mutual enrichment and bridge-building between Israeli and Palestinian intellectual and academic communities. Every effort will be made to reinforce and re-establish links between professionals in UNESCO's fields of competence, representatives of civil society, and youth from both sides, with a view to helping to break the vicious cycle of conflict. In this context, UNESCO considers it particularly vital for dialogue between NGOs from both sides to take place in order to strengthen civil society engagement in and responsibility for reconciliation processes.

Indeed, above and beyond our participation in reconstruction, UNESCO has a significant contribution to make toward reconciliation between the two peoples. I personally have high hopes for our proposed initiatives concerning the revision of Israeli and Palestinian school textbooks and the safeguarding of the heritage of the Old City of Jerusalem. The measures we are taking today are a clear expression of our renewed and enhanced commitment to a cause that requires and deserves our best efforts. For my part, I will do my utmost to satisfy the confidence placed in me by UNESCO's Member States and I call upon all members of the Secretariat to spare no effort in performing the tasks that lie ahead.