



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO

Irina Bokova,

**on the occasion of the agenda item concerning the admission of Palestine
as UNESCO State Member**

Plenary session of the 36th session of the General Conference of UNESCO

Paris, 31 October 2011

Madam President of the General Conference,
Madam Chair of the Executive Board,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are witnessing a historic event, and we all sense, at this time, the symbolic significance and the importance of this decision for the Palestinian people and for UNESCO.

It is the fruit of a people's aspiration to join fully the family of world nations, linked together by the same ambition for peace and shared values.

As the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr Ban Ki-moon, has emphasized, a two-State solution, each living in peace and security, has been long awaited in the region.

I welcome Palestine and wish to take this opportunity to recall that our cooperation dates back many years.

I think of our efforts to train teachers and to enrol students in the Gaza Strip.

I also think of the fellowships that we fund and of the training workshops held on safety for journalists.

I should like to say that UNESCO has made tremendous efforts to preserve cultural heritage and implement a sustainable management plan for the Tell Balata site in Nablus, the mosaics at the Qasr Hisham Archaeological Park, the Church of the Nativity, and the Riwaya Museum in Bethlehem.

I have heard, and more loudly than ever, the call of the Palestinian people for UNESCO to strengthen its commitment and bolster its efforts in its fields of competence.

In reply, I wish to say once more that I will continue this cooperation, motivated by the deepest conviction that a high-quality education system, a dynamic culture and pluralistic media are the solid foundations of any society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The admission of a new Member State is a mark of respect and confidence.

This must be an opportunity to strengthen the Organization and not weaken it, a chance for all to commit once again to the values we share and not to be divided.

Let me be frank. As Director-General, it is my responsibility to say that I am concerned by the potential challenges that may arise to the universality and financial stability of the Organization.

I am worried we may confront a situation that could erode UNESCO as a universal platform for dialogue. I am worried for the stability of its budget.

It is well-known that funding from our largest contributor, the United States, may be jeopardized.

I believe it is the responsibility of all of us to make sure that UNESCO does not suffer unduly as a result.

I am thinking of those thousands of girls and women in Afghanistan, in Africa and around the world, who have learned to read and write, with the help of UNESCO.

I have in mind Khalida, a young Afghan woman from the Paktika Province, enrolled in a UNESCO training course, who said [I quote]:

“My family was hesitant at first about me joining this programme. But I have learned many new techniques and realized that, as an Afghan woman, I can work together with men and service my community.”

Khalida benefits from UNESCO’s work to enhance literacy in Afghanistan.

I am thinking about the illiterate policemen in Kabul, in Kandahar and other cities, who are learning to read and write to better protect their citizens, thanks to us.

I am thinking of the Iraqi education satellite channel that supports learning to Iraqi girls and boys, including refugees and internally displaced persons.

I am thinking of the hundreds of journalists around the world who are at this very moment harassed, killed or imprisoned, because they stand by the truth -- UNESCO stands by them and speaks out for them.

I am thinking also about the stolen treasure of Benghazi, Libya, for which UNESCO was first to ring the alarm bell.

I am thinking of the millions of lives that may be saved by the Tsunami warning system we launched in the Indian Ocean on 12 October, in response to the 2004 natural disaster.

At this time, I know these thoughts are also on your mind.

The fabric of our societies can be easily torn and is long to mend. I am saddened by the possible loss of momentum and energy in UNESCO.

I cannot imagine we would let these women and men down.

UNESCO’s work is too important to be jeopardized.

Our Organization was created sixty six years ago to ensure that education, the sciences, culture and communication bring people together and foster a culture of peace.

This is our role as a specialized agency of the United Nations.

We are committed to taking our vital mandate forward. I appeal to you all to upkeep UNESCO's ability to act.

In welcoming once again Palestine to the UNESCO family, let me state clearly that we need each and every member of this Organization to be fully engaged.