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The Blue Shield : symbol of cultural heritage protection

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Our vision is that in time the Blue Shield symbol should become for cultural heritage protection what the Red Cross is for humanitarian protection

The Blue Shield is the symbol specified in the 1954 Hague Convention for marking cultural sites to give them protection from attack in the event of armed conflict. It is also the name of an international committee set up in 1996 to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by wars and natural disasters.

The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) brings together the knowledge, experience and international networks of four expert organisations: the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Council of Museums (ICOM) the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). These represent an unrivalled body of expertise to advise and assist in responding to events such as war in former Yugoslavia or Afghanistan, hurricane damage in Central America or earthquakes in the Far East. ICBS is international, independent and professional.

The ICBS works for the protection of the world's cultural heritage, in particular by:

- ◆ encouraging safeguarding and respect for cultural property and promoting risk preparedness;
- ◆ training experts at national and regional level to prevent, control and recover from disasters;

- ◆ facilitating international responses to threats or emergencies threatening cultural property;
- ◆ co-operating with other bodies including UNESCO, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Radenci Declaration

A seminar was held in Radenci, Slovenia, in November 1998, to train personnel to intervene following armed conflict or natural disasters. Participants from 12 countries, drawn from museums, archives, libraries and historic buildings, spent a week discussing strategies and tactics for dealing with disasters. Case studies on war damage in Bosnia and Croatia, flood damage in Poland, earthquake damage in Italy, together with the experiences of Dutch and Swedish military personnel, including a former UN commander in Bosnia, provided the raw material for the seminar, which was targeted at personnel in eastern and southern Europe.

The seminar drafted a joint statement, to be known as the Radenci Declaration calling for:

- the protection, safeguard and respect of cultural property - in both normal and exceptional situations - to be included in national policies and programmes;
- strategies to assess and reduce risk and to improve response capacity in the event of threat to cultural property to be developed;
- institutions caring for the cultural heritage, to integrate risk preparedness and management within their activities.

New Protocol to Hague Convention

The ICBS has actively worked for the revision of the 1954 Hague Convention for protecting cultural heritage in armed conflict, believing that the preservation of cultural property is of great importance for all peoples of the world. ICBS welcomes the new Protocol agreed in The Hague in 1999, which gives clearer and increased protection, and extends the ability to prosecute those who breach it.

The new Protocol also established an inter-governmental committee of states to monitor and review the operation of the Convention. UNESCO is responsible for organising the committee. The ICBS, together with the ICRC and ICCROM, is given a specific advisory role to this new committee. The recognition of ICBS in the new Protocol is unprecedented, and adds weight to its work in national and international circles. ICBS regularly surveys the world's trouble spots for cultural heritage and identifies areas for co-operation, in conjunction with the other international bodies.

To Mark or not to Mark?

One question arises frequently in discussion: does using the Blue Shield symbol help to protect the building or site, or does it, as some recent experience indicates, mark it out as a target for hostile forces? Whilst recognising the danger, the ICBS is strongly in favour of marking, since without it the full protection of international law will not be available to cultural sites and their contents. After all, the Red Cross symbol has on occasions been attacked in 20 century conflicts, yet there is no suggestion that it should not be used.

National Blue Shield Committees

It is vital that the international initiative is taken up and supported by local initiatives. Blue Shield Committees have already been formed in a number of countries including Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom.

ICBS works to encourage the formation of other national Blue Shield committees, drawing in the different cultural heritage organisations and institutions. To facilitate this, ICBS has established a series of principles which all national committees must respect. The first is that the different organisations should support joint actions with each other, which will increase their effectiveness and avoid duplication of effort. Second, each of the organisations represented on the committee must respect the independence of the others. Third, the committee must remain neutral, avoiding political controversy, and also maintaining balance between the interests of the different organisations. Fourth, the committee must uphold the highest professional standards, including mutual respect for the professional values of other members. Fifth, the committee must respect the diversity of cultural identity. Sixth, the committee must always work on a not for profit basis.

National committees can multiply effectiveness by bringing together the different professions, local and national government, the emergency services and the armed forces. They can provide a forum to improve emergency preparedness by sharing experiences and exchanging information. They can provide a focus for raising national awareness of the threats to cultural heritage. They can also promote the ratification and implementation by national governments of the Hague Convention and associated Protocols.

The great strength of Blue Shield is that it is cross-sectoral, bringing together professions and institutions across the cultural spectrum. By pooling their expertise, and drawing in military authorities and emergency services, the Blue Shield offers a powerful model for managing disaster risks at a national level.