

THE BLUE SHIELD NETWORK: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

I am very pleased to be here with you today in these splendid surroundings and to have the opportunity to explain the work of the Blue Shield network, in the areas of the protection of cultural property and disaster preparedness, to members of the American Bar Association. I am involved in these initiatives because, as Secretary General of the International Council on Archives, I am ex officio a member of the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) and ICA members are active in national Blue Shield Committees throughout the world.

By way of background, I should explain that the International Council on Archives (ICA) is the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that has represented the cause of archives and of archivists on the world stage since 1948. Today we have about 1,400 institutional and individual members in 195 countries and territories throughout the world. The organization is run by a small secretariat based here in Paris and we largely depend on the voluntary efforts of our members for our

achievements. We are officially recognized by UNESCO, with whom we have worked closely on common projects over many years. Although archive professionals throughout the world work in very different circumstances, from the thousands of expert staff who work for the National Archives and Records Administration in the United States, to the single archivist working alone in an isolated Pacific Island, many of them are today facing up to similar challenges – the preservation of unique and irreplaceable archives; balancing the requirements of preservation against increasing demands for access; the management of data created in electronic form; and securing the resources and training in order to carry out all of the above. So ICA's top priorities today are;-

1. To raise awareness of the importance of effective records and archives management for good governance and democratic accountability;
2. to harness the use of new technologies for improved preservation and access;

3. To build capacity in the archives profession worldwide in order to meet global challenges

We have put in place a programme of over fifty projects to meet these objectives, including some in the area of disaster prevention and control.

Archives are easily overlooked during times of armed conflict when attention is entirely focused on attaining military objectives and offering support to military and civilian casualties. However, archives contain the memories of communities, peoples and nations and, once they have perished, they cannot easily be reconstituted. Without the preservation of collective memory, societies will not have a common history and will lose a part of their identity. They will in consequence be permanently impoverished. If this justification for protecting archives in times of armed conflict is somewhat general and high flown, it is backed up by a much more pragmatic argument. Archive institutions often hold the vital records – the registers of births, marriages and deaths; the

registers of land and other property; and constitutions giving citizens certain inalienable rights – which are essential to the functioning of civil society. If these records are not preserved, then a society's capacity to recover from armed conflict will be severely impaired.

ICA recognizes that, as an organization with many volunteers but severely limited finances, it can only do so much on its own to improve the protection of archives. That is why we are so eager to enter into partnerships with others, and this is one of the main attractions of the Blue Shield network for us.

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 order to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by armed conflicts and natural disasters. ICBS was founded in 1996 by four expert organizations: ICA; the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA); the International Council

on Museums (ICOM); and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). They were joined by the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations (CCAAA) in 2005. 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

The resources that ICBS has are minute in relation to the huge problems which it has to confront. It has issued press releases

and draw the attention of nation states involved in armed conflicts to the importance of cultural property. It has sometimes received the courtesy of a considered response from the governments concerned. The expression of professional solidarity gives comfort and support to professional colleagues trying to protect cultural property in extremely testing circumstances. However, it is still a long way off from fulfilling its aspiration that the Blue Shield should become the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross and should be as active and as well known as Medecins sans Frontieres in the humanitarian area.

ICBS actively worked for the revision of the 1954 Hague Convention and welcomed the 2nd Protocol to this Convention in 1999. The 2nd Protocol severely limited the circumstances in which an attack could be mounted on the grounds of military necessity. It introduced the concept of a cultural war crime. It also made provision for 'enhanced protection' of the most important institutions and collections. It set up a 12 member

committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which meets at least once a year. Under article 27 of the 2nd Protocol, ICBS is formally recognized as an advisory body to the Committee and to the States Parties. Now that guidelines for implementation of The Hague Convention and the 2nd Protocol are in place, ICBS and its constituent organizations, including ICA, look forward to exercising this advisory role to the full. For the Convention and the 2nd Protocol to become more effective, more States Parties need to ratify it and many of those, who have formally ratified it, need to engage with it more. And UNESCO needs to find the resources to ensure that the recently agreed Guidelines will be adhered to in practice, and not rapidly become a dead letter.

The Blue Shield network would count for a great deal less, if it was not supported by an increasing number of national Blue Shield Committees. At the present time there are nearly 40 national Blue Shield Committees either in operation or under construction. National Committees have most recently been set

up in Israel, the United States, Senegal, Austria and Indonesia. It is interesting to note that threats or damage to cultural property stimulated the creation of national committees in some of these countries. Ideally, there should be representatives from each of the five organizations represented on ICBS, but this provision needs to be interpreted sensibly. Members of national committees should support joint actions with each other, but also respect the interdependence of their partners; national committees should remain politically neutral; should uphold the highest professional standards; respect the diversity of cultural identity; and must always work on a not for profit basis. Final approval for the creation of national committees is given by ICBS on the basis of these criteria.

There are strong advantages in having a national committee. Many disasters, for example severe flooding, can affect many institutions across the cultural sectors, and do not respect artificial demarcation lines between libraries, archives and museums. The same is true of armed conflicts. Even in cases

where only a single service is affected, as was the case with the collapse of the building housing the municipal archives in Köln in March 2009, other cultural and civil institutions are very often willing to help, and a national Blue Shield Committee can provide an effective mechanism for co-ordination. A national Blue Shield Committee should lead to improved training for disasters, a pooling of resources, and closer relations with the civilian administrators and military personnel, who would play a crucial role in real-life cases where archives and other cultural property are under threat.

New national committees have been set up at a steady rate in recent years and there is every reason to suppose this progress will be maintained or even accelerated. The creation of the new Association of National Blue Shield Committees (ANCBS), which was agreed at The Hague in December 2008 and which coordinates the cooperative work of national committees, provides grounds for cautious optimism. ANCBS has offices in The Hague and today maintains the Blue Shield website –

www.ancbs, which is our main communications tool and has information about the network's most recent initiatives, including the planned creation of a Treatment Centre for libraries and archives on Haiti, which suffered major damage from an earthquake on 12 January. This Treatment Centre will work in partnership with another centre close by, focusing museum artifacts, which has been organized by the Smithsonian Institution.

As a constructive alternative to organizing its own rescue and recovery missions, ICA has decided instead to support the work of ANCBS and thereby avoid duplication of effort. ICA looks to the other partner organizations in the Blue Shield to adopt a similarly collaborative and co-operative approach, making use of the Blue Shield network wherever possible, rather than emphasizing the needs of one specific cultural sector to the exclusion of the others.

One final point to make about the Blue Shield network: it is not entirely a matter of disinterested philanthropy that motivates

professionals from one country to come and help in another country where a disaster has taken place. Who can be entirely confident that disaster will never strike in their own country or institution? Nobody is entirely immune from the risk of disaster. In other words, involvement in the Blue Shield may be based just as much on reciprocity and enlightened self-interest, as pure idealism, although the power of the latter should never be cynically discounted.

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