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UNESCO Director-General appeals for solidarity with Iraqi academics

Paris, 14 April – The Director-General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura, today appealed on the international community to support Iraqi academics and intellectuals and called for measures to protect them from violence.

“I call on the international community,” the Director-General declared, “to show solidarity with Iraqi academics and intellectuals who are subjected to a heinous campaign of violence.”

The Director-General issued this appeal after meeting with Muhyi Alkateeb, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Iraq to UNESCO, and representatives of two international networks of intellectuals advocating the protection of Iraqi academics. They described the impact of threats, kidnappings and killings on Iraqi academics. Many are prevented from carrying out their work and are considering leaving the country at a time when their contribution to the reconstruction of Iraq is badly needed, they said. They further pointed out that deteriorating security on campuses was undermining academic life for students as well.

During the meeting, the Ambassador asked Mr Matsuura for assistance in raising awareness and international support for Iraqi academics. “UNESCO will study proposals,” the Director-General pledged, “to help support and protect Iraqi academics and intellectuals. Iraq has long been at the forefront of thought and learning in the Middle East and UNESCO is committed to doing all it can to help in the reconstruction of its educational system and the development of its capacities. This is crucial so that Iraq may prepare a better future for itself through education, dialogue and exchange.”

UNESCO’s Office for Iraq has been increasingly engaged with the Iraqi authorities to create an international network of solidarity between Iraqi and foreign universities. UNESCO has also been channelling material and logistical help for the reconstruction of Iraq’s educational system.

This morning’s meeting took place amidst reports of increasing violence against academics and intellectuals and of a Conference at the University of Westminster (UK) on 8 April 2006, whose participants issued an appeal requesting support from international organizations, including UNESCO, in favour of Iraqi academics and scientists. According to the Center for the Arab and Mediterranean World, some 180 academics have been killed in Iraq since 2003 and thousands more have been driven into exile.
