

**Statement by H. E. Mr. Jeyhun Bayramov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, at the General Policy Debates of the 41<sup>st</sup> Session of the General Conference of UNESCO**

*Paris, UNESCO Headquarters*

*10 November 2021*

Dear President of the General Conference,

Dear Chairperson of the Executive Board,

Dear Madame Director-General,

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to congratulate H.E. Mr. Santiago Irazabal Mourao on the assumption of his presidency of the 41st Session of the General Conference and wish him every success in fulfilling that highly responsible duty. I also express my gratitude to H.E. Mr. Ahmet Altay Cengizer for the hard work in presiding over the 40th Session of the General Conference.

Using this opportunity, I would like to congratulate Madame Audrey Azoulay on her re-election as the Director-General of UNESCO and wish her every success during her second mandate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year we are celebrating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of UNESCO. Throughout these years, UNESCO has been championing the core principles of humanity, such as building peace in the minds of men and women to promote culture, ensure the continuity of intercultural dialogue, make better access to education for all, preserve the environment, and improve social and economic conditions. We, the UNESCO family, can be proud of this honorable path.

Today the relevance of UNESCO is more than ever, as we are going through unprecedented challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic continues posing a serious threat to the whole world. From the very beginning, our Government has been taking robust measures to minimize the negative impact of the pandemic on its population as well as on the international community. 60% of our population has already been vaccinated. We have also made voluntary financial contributions to the World Health Organization in the amount of 10 million USD and provided financial and humanitarian assistance to more than 30 countries to support their fight against the coronavirus.

Mr. President,

Azerbaijan has a longstanding relationship with UNESCO and next year we will celebrate the 30th anniversary of our membership to UNESCO. Thanks to the tireless efforts of the First Vice-President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Madame Mehriban Aliyeva, we have strong, dynamic partnership with UNESCO. Within these 30 years, Azerbaijan has become an important and a reliable partner of the Organization.

Azerbaijan supports Organization's noble mission in different parts of the world and is one of the main partners in promotion of intercultural dialogue. Azerbaijan has been supporting UNESCO Member States from African, Asian and Latin American regions in such priority areas as girl's education, safeguarding tangible and intangible cultural heritage, science and innovation technologies, and disaster risk preparedness through the Trust Fund that has been established between UNESCO and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is committed to the protection of both cultural and natural heritage globally. Considering the utmost importance of preserving the rich cultural heritage of Africa, Azerbaijan has decided to financially contribute to the Africa World Heritage Fund. Besides, Azerbaijan supports UNESCO's Global Priority Africa and calls on international community to pay special attention to the needs of the Small Island Developing States.

Azerbaijan expressed its intention to join the Global Education Coalition, launched by UNESCO in March 2020. In this regard, Azerbaijan will contribute to the supportive actions, aimed at assisting all learners around the world, particularly, the most vulnerable ones. I am proud to announce the contribution of one million USD by my Government to Global Education Coalition.

Honorable Delegates,

As you are well aware, Azerbaijan liberated its territories from the 30-years long occupation by Armenia and with the signing of the Trilateral Statement by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Russia and Armenia on November 10, 2020, the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan came to an end.

The results of the Armenian occupation were devastating. Armenia has pursued systematic policy to destroy, pillage and misappropriate Azerbaijan's cultural heritage both in the territories it has occupied for 30 years and in Armenia itself.

During the occupation period, hundreds of cultural property have been deliberately and completely destroyed, damaged, looted and subjected to alteration with a view to changing their historical and cultural character. Out of 67 mosques, 65 have been razed to the ground and the remaining 2 were desecrated and used as stables for pigs and cows in total disrespect to the Muslim World. Thousands of museum artifacts have been illegally exported to Armenia. By all these actions, Armenia pursued far-reaching targets of removing any sign heralding their Azerbaijani origins, as an example of cultural genocide. Armenia also refuses to share the maps of the minefields, deliberately preventing the return of IDPs to the liberated territories.

It also constitutes a gross violation of international law, including UNESCO instruments, such as the 1954 Hague Convention and its Two Protocols, as well as the 1970 Convention.

In our various communications, we alerted UNESCO of these gross violations and illegal activities committed by Armenia and requested the need to dispatch a technical mission to the occupied territories throughout the past 30 years. Unfortunately, each time Armenia prevented the dispatch of this mission, which was acknowledged by UNESCO in its 2005 report.

The Government of Azerbaijan has already initiated practical steps aiming at eliminating the consequences of decades-long occupation followed by massive destruction. At the highest-level Azerbaijan declared its determination that all cultural and religious monuments in the liberated territories regardless of their origin will be duly preserved and restored. Azerbaijan will continue to build upon these ideals and values and guarantees all the rights for all its citizens, irrespective of their ethnic or religious affiliation. Indeed, Azerbaijan is home to more than 50 different ethnic groups.

Azerbaijan in its efforts of post-conflict rehabilitation is looking forward to cooperation with UNESCO. Over the past months since the end of the conflict Azerbaijan and the UNESCO have been actively engaged into dialogue with a view of dispatching a technical mission to the liberated territories. The two sides have agreed on several complex technical, legal, and political aspects of the mission, which will ensure its effectiveness and independence.

The assessment of the unprecedented damage inflicted upon our cultural heritage is a priority for our Government and we are ready to host independent technical mission as soon as possible. Unfortunately, Armenia is trying to block and politicize the mission, which is detrimental to its successful accomplishment. Armenia must refrain from interfering into this process and cease exploiting this Organization for its own political purposes.

Excellences,

On the occasion of the 880th anniversary of the great Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi, this year is declared as the "Year of Nizami Ganjavi" in Azerbaijan. On the 4th of October, Azerbaijan organized the event dedicated to Nizami Ganjavi at UNESCO Headquarters and we extend our appreciation to Madame Director-General for co-hosting this event. Azerbaijan has just hosted 8<sup>th</sup> Baku Global Forum, organized by the Nizami Ganjavi International Center, bringing together the representatives of more than 40 countries.

In line with UNESCO's ideals and commitments, Azerbaijan promotes intercultural dialogue, tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the world. Baku Process, initiated in 2008 by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, His Excellency Mr. Ilham Aliyev has become a global platform in fostering the rapprochement of cultures in partnership with international and regional organizations, including UNESCO.

We feel honored and privileged to continue chairing Non-Aligned Movement and greatly appreciate the unanimous decision of our fellow 120 member states to extend our chairmanship to another one year, until the end of 2023.

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

In conclusion, Azerbaijan, as a candidate country to the UNESCO Executive Board, for the term 2021-2025, counts on your valuable support. Your trust will give us an opportunity to further contribute and assist our Organization in realizing its noble goals and ideals.

Thank you.