

## BLUE SHIELD A French Blue Shield Committee

Armed conflicts as well as natural disasters endanger our cultural heritage daily. This is why, following the recent dreadful events in former Yugoslavia, four cultural NGOs decided to create the International Committee of the Blue Shield. The blue shield was the emblem adopted by the *Hague Convention (1954) for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the event of Armed Conflict* to mark buildings that must be preserved from destruction and bombing. ICA (International Council on Archives), ICOM (International Council of Museums), ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) joined together in 1996 to provide authorities and professionals with expertise and networks in case of a conflict or disaster that could affect cultural heritage throughout the world. The four organisations are also working together to organise risk preparedness at an international level and to encourage it at a national level.

Since its creation, it has been obvious that the efficiency of ICBS would be enhanced by the creation of national Blue Shield Committees. It is vital that the international initiative be taken up and supported by local initiatives. Thus Blue Shield Committees have been formed in a number of countries. Belgium was the first to do so, soon followed by The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and France. Other countries are preparing to do so: Italy and the Czech Republic have almost constituted their committees and Poland, Russia and several other countries are planning to do so. Some other countries, such as Switzerland and the United States, have similar organisations that could take the lead in the case of emergency.

It took almost three years between the first contact between Segolène Bergeon from ICOM and Marie-Thérèse Varlamoff from IFLA and the official creation of the French National Blue Shield Committee. During these three years, a number of meetings were held by a working group that gathered the two representatives of ICOM and IFLA, plus representatives from ICA – Christine Martella – and ICOMOS – Daniel Lefèvre. They were joined from time to time by various other people who had been contacted because of their expertise in the rescue or legal domain. The first task of this group was to implement the writing of statutes and of the rules of the forthcoming committee. It was a rather complicated task because of the complexity of French law and also because cultural heritage in France belongs mainly to the nation – consequently many ministries and officials had to be consulted and involved.

The statutes were finally completed and adopted during a constituting General Assembly in June 2001 and formally recognised as an Association in October 2001. The French National Blue Shield Committee is represented by a president and three vice-presidents, representing the four organisations. A treasurer, an assistant-treasurer and a secretary-general plus a deputy secretary-general complete the governing Board of the Committee.

During the past year much has not yet been done, but the last General Assembly, held in June 2002, decided on the creation of specific working groups gathering people from different areas of France to work on such subjects as disaster planning, legal aspects, training or communicating on disasters and preventive measures. It has also been proposed to create local Blue Shield committees that could take over from the National Committee. Some attempts have already been made in the PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur) Region to federate efforts and try to work on the flood chapter. A meeting was held in Avignon in April 2002 that gathered some ten persons from the archival, museum and library sector as well as conservators. At first they had tried to work more specifically on the subject of floods, but quickly found out that it was inseparable from fire rescue operations. So the group decided to concentrate its efforts not on the treatment of one type of disaster in particular, but on the constitution of a regional network that would be able to react to disasters of different kinds. The meeting concluded with the project of gathering the most eminent decision-makers in the region during the Autumn of 2002, in order to raise awareness on disaster issues and methods for preventing or mitigating them.

This regional experience should be followed by more in the coming months and recent past disasters, such as the explosion of a chemical plant in Toulouse, could be the occasion for exploring the feasibility of creating a regional Blue Shield Committee to back up the national committee.

The French National Blue Shield Committee takes over from the International Blue Shield Committee for all actions concerning the French territory. Its goal is to raise awareness among heritage professionals, decision makers, rescue services and the public at large of the importance and fragility of the cultural heritage and the respect due to it. It aims at advocating and promoting all actions to prevent disasters and at organising rescue actions in case of emergency and proposing its expertise during the recovery phase. One of the main objectives remains to organise a network of specialists and resource persons to be called on whenever necessary. To reach this goal, the French National Blue Shield Committee means to work in co-operation with institutions, ministries, local decision makers, and rescue teams such as the fire brigades and the army. It also aims to keep track of any private supplier or company able to respond quickly and effectively when called on in case of emergency. Last but not least, the French National Blue Shield Committee will keep the International Committee informed of its actions and projects and will also collaborate with other national Blue Shield Committees anytime it will think it appropriate and useful.

In time, the French National Blue Shield Committee intends to become the equivalent of the Red Cross in the cultural domain.

\* IFLA PAC is the Core Activity on Preservation and Conservation of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. It is hosted by the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.

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