His Excellency Vira Rojpojchanarat, Minister of Culture, Thailand, Bovornvate Rungruji, Director-General, The Fine Arts Department, Thailand, South-East Asian country delegates, UNESCO partners, colleagues and distinguished guests

- It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here today to participate in the UNESCO Sub-regional Symposium for the Fight against Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Heritage in South-East Asia’ - the first time that UNESCO organizes such a meeting on this topic for South-East Asia

- In recent years with the social-economic growth of the region, the rapid expansion of the art market in particular through the internet has created a high demand for cultural objects thereby increasing the hazards of illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts originating from countries that often have insufficient preventive measures in place

- The symposium is being held in the context of the implementation of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, as well as of the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects

- Unfortunately, only three out of the eleven South-East Asian countries have ratified the 1970 Convention, these are Cambodia, Viet Nam and more recently Myanmar. As far as the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention is concerned, the only State Party in South-East Asia is Cambodia. At the same time, South-East Asia continues to be a major hub of illicit trafficking, both as a source of the objects as well as a transit point.
• It is important to be aware that the fight can only be effective if it is an international effort. Countries must act beyond their own borders and join together to stop the flow of the illicit trafficking of countries unique and often irreplaceable cultural heritage. The Conventions in this regard are essential tools in achieving this.

• This conference is part of a series of symposia benefitting the Asia-Pacific region. In December 2013, a similar symposium was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, for South Asian countries and in July 2015 another major event will take place in Port Vila, Vanuatu, focused on the protection of movable cultural heritage in the Pacific sub-region

• Through the sharing of your individual country experiences, and by examining the challenges you each face whilst also highlighting best practices - we can collectively assess and outline strategies to move forward with regards preventative measures, restitution strategies and importantly developing regional cooperation through the creation of new networks

• We are grateful to have the ongoing support and collaboration from UNESCO’s partners in the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural heritage, which include INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, UNIDROIT, UNODC and ICOM

• In closing, I would like to particularly thank the generous support provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of the Netherlands for making this Symposium possible

Thank you.