

Summary records
14th Extraordinary session of the World Heritage Committee

2 November 2020
(online meeting)
12.00 p.m. – 3.00 p.m.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee decided in April 2020 to postpone to a later date the 44th session of the Committee initially scheduled for June/July 2020. During its meeting on 16 October 2020, the Bureau considered, that due to the prevailing situation worldwide, the conditions were not met for the holding of the 44th session in 2020. An extraordinary session of the World Heritage Committee was in consequence convened at the request of a majority of two-thirds of the Committee members, with the purpose to suspend Rule 2.1 of the Rules of Procedure of the Committee that states that “[t]he Committee shall meet at least once per year in ordinary session”, and to discuss dates for the holding of the 44th session.

Item I. Opening of the session

The **Chairperson of the World Heritage Committee, H.E. Mr. Tian Xuejun**, welcomed all participants to this extraordinary session of the Committee and took the opportunity to warmly congratulate Somalia, which had indeed become the 194th State Party to the World Heritage Convention on 23 October 2020.

The Chairperson then expressed his deep gratitude to all participants for their support since his election at the 43rd session of the World Heritage Committee. He also thanked the Secretariat and the Advisory Bodies to the Committee for their continuous work in making site monitoring and consultations possible under the very special circumstances due to the pandemic. In this regard, considering the recommendations from the panel, the Chairperson mentioned that he had approved 20 requests for International Assistance from 16 States Parties, most of which were priority countries identified by the Committee.

The Chairperson reminded that due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in line with Rule 4.1 of the Rules of Procedure of the World Heritage Committee, he requested the agreement of the members of the Bureau to postpone the 44th session to a later date. The Chairperson recalled that after the members of the Bureau agreed to this proposal in April 2020, he launched on 31 August 2020 a second consultation requesting the views of the members of the Bureau on determining the new dates for the 44th session of the Committee.

Following this consultation, he convened an online meeting of the Bureau members on 16 October 2020 to further discuss this matter, all States Parties being invited to attend the meeting as observers. During this meeting, the Bureau considered that the conditions were not met to hold the 44th session in 2020. He recalled that the Bureau having reached such an agreement, and in conformity with Rule 52 of the Rules of Procedure of the Committee, the Committee itself had to meet in plenary to suspend Rule 2.1 of its Rules of Procedure. The Secretariat shared this requirement with all Committee members on 16 October, and a majority of two-thirds of Committee members concurred with the holding of such extraordinary session to suspend Rule 2.1 and to discuss the dates for the 44th session in 2021.

He concluded by adding that this meeting represented an opportunity for all Committee members to share their views regarding the possible dates of the session and that he was confident that the Committee would come out with a satisfactory solution for everyone in the best interest of the World Heritage Convention.

In his introductory remark, the **Assistant Director-General for Culture (ADG/CLT), Mr. Ernesto Ottone R.**, praised the holding of this online meeting of the Committee, with the

aim to allow progress in the steps towards the holding of the 44th session of the Heritage Committee. He stressed the importance of the decision to be taken by the Committee during its meeting. ADG/CLT underlined that in order to allow stakeholders to the World Heritage Convention to move forward in the implementation of the Convention under the best possible conditions, it was essential to have visibility on the statutory processes. In this regard, he further stated that an official decision on the holding of the 44th session would undoubtedly provide clarifications and this necessary visibility.

Finally, ADG/CLT reiterated the Secretariat's full support to the Committee, both logistical and statutory, within the framework of the organization of the subsequent sessions. He concluded that he had no doubts that the Committee would have constructive exchanges under the efficient and enlightened Chairmanship of H.E. Mr. Tian Xuejun. ADG/CLT seized this opportunity to renew its thanks to the Chairperson, to all Committee members and to the Chinese representation for their cooperation in this complex process.

Item 2. Adoption of the Agenda

Before starting the discussion with the Agenda item, the Chairperson of the World Heritage Committee gave the floor to the **Director of the World Heritage Centre (DIR/WHC), Ms. Mechtild Rössler**, to give some technical explanation for the conduct of the meeting.

The **Chairperson** thanked the Director of the World Heritage Centre and asked whether members of the Committee had interventions or amendments to the Agenda of the meeting. As no objections were raised, the Chairperson declared the Agenda adopted, as well as Decision **14 EXT.COM 2**.

Item 3. Suspension of Rule 2.1 of the Rules of Procedure of the World Heritage Committee

The **Chairperson** opened the next item of the Agenda of the Committee, namely the suspension of Rule 2.1 of the Rules of Procedure of the World Heritage Committee, which states that “[t]he Committee shall meet at least once per year in ordinary session”.

As no objections were raised, and to allow for the 44th session to take place in 2021, the Chairperson declared that Rule 2.1 of the Committee's rules of Procedure was suspended, and Decision **14 EXT.COM 3** adopted.

Item 4. Dates for the holding of the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee

As the Extraordinary session represented an opportunity for Committee members and States Parties Observers to express their opinions and share their views regarding the organization of the session, and with the aim to reach consensus the **Chairperson** suggested to listen to Committee members on the option to choose for the holding the 44th session before deciding on the dates themselves.

Before doing so, he invited **ADG/CLT** to present Working Document WHC/20/14EXT.COM/4. ADG/CLT clarified that an alternative option, called “Option 5/Extended session”, was prepared based on the numerous comments and concerns raised by States Parties following the presentation of the different possible options by the Secretariat during the Information Meeting of 30 September last. To address these comments, and taking into consideration positive aspects of the other options, the Secretariat elaborated this new scenario with several advantages, mainly the normalization of the statutory cycles for state of conservation and nominations at the end of the 44th session in 2021, very few suspensions to the Rules of Procedure, adoption at the end of the 44th session of the Agenda of the 45th session in 2022 and no disruption to the Bureau members election cycle. Given the importance and complexity

of the task for the Committee, ADG/CLT added that he had personally taken the time to explain to all Committee members the implications of such extended session.

He insisted that an eventual extended 44th session should in no way constitute any precedent and should be considered only as an exceptional response to the unprecedented situation caused by the COVID-19 crisis. He further underlined that whatever the decisions the Committee may adopt, it shall bear no consequences on its future sessions. Recalling that the health crisis continues to evolve worldwide, ADG/CLT concluded that despite efforts made, a certain degree of uncertainty with regard of the organization of the session will remain. He stressed that decisions adopted by other conventions in this regard may not be convertible or transposable to the 1972 Convention.

The **Director of the World Heritage Centre (DIR/WHC), Ms. Mechtild Rössler**, further clarified procedural aspects of the extended 44th session option. She indicated that the Agenda of the extended 44th session will consist of the Agenda items already planned for the 44th session (as adopted by the Committee at its 43rd session) to which all the items already foreseen for 2021 by decision of the Committee at its previous sessions would need to be added.

In this regard, the Secretariat has identified three specific Agenda items, which will need to be added to the extended 44th session:

- *World Heritage Convention and Sustainable Development*
- *Report on the results of the Third cycle of the Periodic Reporting exercise in Africa*
- *Progress report on the implementation of the Action Plan(s) for the 2nd Cycle of Periodic Reporting in the other regions*

Furthermore, the item on the Budget would need to include another component, regarding the *Budget proposal of the World Heritage Fund under the next biennium (2022-2023)*, as is always the case at the last Committee session of the biennium.

The reporting period for regular items, such as the Secretariat report, the Advisory Bodies reports, the report on capacity-building activities, among others, will simply be extended from one to two years without additional documents needed.

With regard to the state of conservation cycles, individual reports foreseen for examination by the 45th session in 2021 would simply be examined together with all those planned for the 44th session in 2020. For properties facing conservation issues of utmost importance and for which a report was initially planned in 2020, the States Parties concerned would have the possibility to provide the Secretariat with additional information by the deadline of 1 February 2021, at the latest.

Regarding the Nomination process, a similar approach would be adopted. She clarified that there will therefore be a total of 26 nominations initially planned for the 44th session in 2020 and 22 nominations maximum originally foreseen for 2021.

However, DIR/WHC highlighted that due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, several planned evaluation missions may not be carried out on time and the evaluation may consequently not be ready for examination by the Committee at its session in 2021. To anticipate such situation, she indicated that the Committee might want to decide whether to examine nominations that have been evaluated and ready and postponed those not ready for 2022, or alternatively, decide that all nominations originally foreseen to be examined in 2021, whether evaluated or not, would be examined in 2022. Finally, DIR/WHC suggested for full transparency, to include the full Agenda of the 44th session in the draft Decision that will be adopted.

The representative of **Norway** stressed that such extended 44th session should take place on an absolute exceptional basis due to the COVID-19 pandemic and should in any case not set any precedent, but agreed to review two cycles of nominations simultaneously in 2021,

provided that the nominations should be examined only if they have undergone an on-site evaluation mission.

The representative of **Thailand** took the floor to support the holding of an extended 44th session in 2021.

The representative of **St. Kitts and Nevis** expressed its satisfaction for not having a “combined” 44th and 45th session in 2021 as he considered it would have implied additional resources for SIDS. To reduce the workload of the forthcoming session, the representative also suggested to streamline Agenda items and to resort as often as possible to their remote review by Committee members and to consider them adopted in the absence of any objections by a set date.

The representative of **Brazil** expressed his satisfaction with holding an extended 44th session in 2021. He then indicated having provided an amendment to the draft Decision of Item 4 to include a request to the Advisory Bodies to propose an exceptional extension of the deadlines for the completion of pending Evaluation missions for nominations to be presented for examination by the World Heritage Committee in the year 2021, while those nominations that could not be examined at its forthcoming session be examined at its session in 2022, without prejudice to the nominations presented for examination in 2022.

The representatives of **Guatemala** indicated his support to Option 5 and the holding of an extended 44th session, while underscoring the need for flexibility for States Parties as regard with procedures while normalizing cycles as soon as the sanitary situation allows for it. He also supported the amendment proposed by the representative of Brazil.

The representative of the **Russian Federation** after having supported the holding of an extended 44th session in 2021, requested consequently clarifications regarding the holding of and exact naming of the session to be held in 2022, and notified that his country had proposed in April 2020 to invite the 46th session of the Committee foreseen for 2022 in Kazan to also celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Convention. He further stated that due to the pandemic, the Russian Federation had already begun financial and institutional preparatory works. In this regard, the representative asked for the inclusion into the draft Decision of a paragraph taking note of this invitation.

The representative of **Spain** took the floor to support the holding of an extended 44th session in 2021.

The representative of **Australia** echoed the representative of Norway on the exceptional character of an extended 44th session that should not set any precedent. He also outlined that, even if such extended session was a pragmatic solution to restore the cycles as soon as possible, it was necessary to uphold the integrity of the Convention. In his view, it was essential that flexibility does not hinder quality-based evaluations. The representative also urged to acknowledge the additional workload to come for the Advisory Bodies, notably with a large quantity of state of conservation reports and with shifted deadlines, despite already limited capacities. He added that with such an important number of state of conservation reports to review in 2021, caution will be required in the selection of the reports to be opened for discussion.

The representative of **Hungary** supported the holding of an extended 44th session but warned that the sanitary situation remained versatile and that no one could guarantee the holding of a full-fledged session in 2021. He asked the Secretariat whether a “plan B” or contingency measures were being evaluated in the case of worsening of the health crisis.

While agreeing with the provisional Agenda of an extended 44th session attached to the working document WHC/20/14EXTCOM/4, the representative of **Egypt** requested clarifications on the possibility for Committee members or States Parties Observers to add other items.

The representative of **Ethiopia** supported the holding of an extended 44th session in 2021, subject to updates depending on the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As uncertainty will most probably remain in the forthcoming months due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the representative of **Uganda** stated that the main concern of his Delegation was to maintain some control over the consequences of the pandemic by anticipating with contingency measures. In case the health crisis remained the same next year, he asked whether it would be possible to retain the suspension of Rule 2.1 of the Rules of Procedure, in order to reduce uncertainty and avoid delaying the work of stakeholders to the Convention.

The representative of **Saudi Arabia** supported the holding of an extended 44th session and, as the representatives of Hungary and Uganda, requested whether the Secretariat could provide a “plan B” or contingency measures in the COVID-19 situation remained unchanged in 2021.

The representative of **Nigeria** also underscored the need for flexibility for States Parties as regard with procedures while normalizing cycles as soon as the sanitary situation allows it, as was mentioned by the representative of Guatemala.

The representative of **Mali** also expressed his support for the holding of an extended 44th session in 2021.

In answering the questions, **DIR/WHC** confirmed having received the invitation by the Russian Federation to host the 46th session in Kazan and if the extended 44th session would be held in 2021, the 45th session would take place in 2022. DIR/WHC reassured that the Secretariat was considering every possibility for the holding of the extended 44th session, including in full online and hybrid formats; an Information document would be prepared by the Secretariat in this regard. Regarding the possibility to streamline Agenda items, DIR/WHC clarified that there were indeed existing procedures, notably for state of conservation reports, allowing for adoption without debates that could be further used to reduce the Agenda items to be reviewed and discussed during the forthcoming session.

The representative of **ICOMOS** recalled that the difficulties due to the pandemic in the organization of activities and programmes have been duly acknowledged by the Advisory Bodies and flexibility has been already given to States Parties, notably in terms of deadlines, with the Panel having already been postponed by two weeks. The representative declared that ICOMOS would reflect on further flexibility, while thanking States Parties for their support provided to accommodate for ongoing challenges, which helped in successfully conducting nearly 75% of planned evaluation missions since July 2020.

The representative of **IUCN** echoed ICOMOS’s comments by adding that no effort was spared to provide States Parties with flexibility on the different processes. Online Panels had been conducted in this sense and deadlines extended for interim reports. However, he underlined that such flexibility should not compromise the quality of evaluations and that respecting procedures was important to ensure quality based decisions and equal treatment to every State Party. Considering that around a third of on-site missions were not to be undertaken, it will not be possible to proceed with the final evaluation of nominations in conformity with the Operational Guidelines. The representative concluded by echoing the Delegate from Australia and urging the Committee to ensure that any decision taken under the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic do not set any undesirable precedent.

The **Chairperson** stated that over the past months, the Chinese authorities had been closely monitoring the prevailing sanitary situation, as well as paying attention to the recommendations of the World Health Organization. He added that, as the host country, the top priority of the Government of China was to ensure the health of every participant and that it would therefore do everything necessary to guarantee the security of the session.

As a response to a number of concerns raised, **DIR/WHC** recalled that, as already announced by ADG/CLT, Information Meetings for States Parties will be organized in due course to give

an overview on the work undertaken and currently ongoing on the “Memory Sites” and “Climate change”.

Based on the discussion of the Committee members, and the consensus reached, the **Chairperson** asked whether the Committee was in favour of “*Option 5*” for the holding of an extended 44th session in 2021. As there were no objection, the Chairperson declared that the 44th session shall be held according to “Option 5/Extended session”.

Regarding the dates of the extended 44th session of the World Heritage Committee, the **Chairperson** then proposed that the session be held in June/July 2021. As no objections were raised, the Chairperson declared that the extended 44th session of the World Heritage Committee would take place in June/July 2021, and that he would liaise with the Secretariat to define the exact dates at a later stage. The Chairperson further stated that the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee together with the Secretariat would coordinate the organization of the session and closely monitor the global situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **Rapporteur** presented the draft Decision **14 EXT.COM 4**, reflecting the elements adopted by the Committee during its session and taking into account the amendment proposed by Brazil, with a few corrections suggested by the Secretariat and the Advisory Bodies.

The representative of **Brazil** welcomed the suggestions by the Secretariat and praised the Advisory Bodies for their flexibility and hoped in this regard that deadlines could be extended until the end of January 2021.

The **Chairperson** then declared draft Decision **14 EXT.COM 4** adopted, as amended.

Before closing the meeting, the Chairperson gave the floor to the Representative of the **Republic of Korea** (Observer). The representative commended the Committee for having reached a consensus on its upcoming session. He expressed his appreciation of the hard work done by the Chairperson, Committee members and Advisory Bodies and recalled that his Delegation has been consistently supportive of resuming normal cycles as a highest priority. In this regard, evaluation missions for nominations and the monitoring of the state of conservation of World Heritage properties are key for many States Parties. He stressed that every effort should be made to respect timetables provided by the Operational Guidelines to the best extent possible. The representative also stressed that the quality of work of the Committee as well as the principles of the Convention should not be compromised in any case, even under these exceptional circumstances. The representative raised concerns on eventual adoptions without debates of state of conservation reports due to time constraints in the framework of the 44th extended session. He underscored that, in his view, reports that may be subject to further questioning or reservations from Committee members would have to be considered for discussion. The representative asserted his confidence that the Chairperson will do its utmost to make the forthcoming session a success.

Closure of the session

Before closing the 14th Extraordinary session of the World Heritage Committee, the **Chairperson** renewed its thanks to all participants for their cooperation in making this session a success. He seized this opportunity to renew the hospitality of the Chinese Government and concluded in looking forward to welcome all delegates in China in 2021.

The session rose until 2.00 p.m.