

The President of the General Conference and the Chairperson of the Executive Board visit Sri Lanka

From 2 to 8 June 2008, the President of UNESCO's General Conference, H.E. Mr George Anastassopoulos, and the Chairperson of the Executive Board, H.E. Mr Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai, visited the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (at the invitation of the Minister of Education of Sri Lanka) accompanied by the Secretary of UNESCO's Governing Bodies Secretariat, Mr Armoogum Parsuramen. The Ambassador of Sri Lanka H.E. Mrs Chitranagnee Wagiswara joined the delegation which was also comprised of Ambassadors and Delegates from Argentina, Iraq, Jordan, Lithuania, Morocco, Oman, Senegal and Ukraine .

This six day tour of Sri Lanka provided Mr Anastassopoulos and Mr Yai, travelling to the country for the first time, with the opportunity to visit five of the seven properties inscribed on the World Heritage List, notably the Old Town of Galle and its Fortifications (inscribed in 1988) that were severely damaged by the 2004 Tsunami.

During their stay, the delegates were also the guests of a cultural performance by students from seven schools in Sri Lanka showcasing the multi ethnic and multi cultural heritage of Sri Lanka, organized by the Ministry of Education and held at Ananda College, a leading Buddhist school.

The heads of UNESCO's Governing Bodies - the President of the General Conference and the Chairperson of the Executive Board - met with the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Hon. Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama and the Minister of Education, Hon. Susil Premajayantha.

On this occasion, the UNESCO delegation expressed its appreciation of the rich and diverse cultural heritage in Sri Lanka and made special reference to the very impressive heritage sites that had been visited by the delegation and expressed the need to continue and enhance conservation of the sites.

Their discussions with the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Hon. Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, widely covered by the local media, focused on ongoing cooperation between UNESCO and Sri Lanka. The Prime Minister notably acknowledged the good work that had been done by UNESCO and emphasized the greater role that could be played by the Organization in the promotion of languages and their links with peace-building processes.

With Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, discussions focused on current developments in Sri Lanka and the role UNESCO could play in the international arena to bring about peace and understanding, and help foster dialogue between communities.

The Delegation expressed its condolences over the terrible toll paid by civilians in a recent spate of bomb attacks in Sri Lanka and voiced the hope for an end to violence and for peace and stability in the country.

During the meeting with Hon. Susil Premajayantha, the Minister of Education, Chairperson of the Sri Lankan National Commission for UNESCO and Sri Lanka's Representative on the Executive Board, discussions centered on UNESCO's mandate in the field of Education and Culture. The delegation commended Sri Lanka on the high rate of literacy and the progress made to achieve the EFA and Millennium Development goals.