



CANADIAN COMMISSION FOR UNESCO
COMMISSION CANADIENNE POUR L'UNESCO

For immediate release

UNESCO MARKS MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY WITH A CELEBRATION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

OTTAWA, FEBRUARY 21, 2003 – UNESCO proclaimed February 21st as International Mother Language Day in 1999 to honour the many languages in the world, the cultures they mediate and the essence of human creativity contained in their development and expression. The resolution was sponsored by Bangladesh and adopted unanimously by all Member States of UNESCO.

Over the past three centuries, languages have died out and disappeared at a steadily increasing pace and the cultural heritage of complete communities is being lost. Today, very few people speak most of the 6,000 known languages around the world. Half of today's languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers, and a quarter have fewer than 1,000.

UNESCO works actively to promote awareness of linguistic diversity as an expression of cultural diversity. In 2001, it published the second edition of its well-respected *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*.

David A. Walden, Secretary-General of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO stated, "Mother languages are an integral part of our intangible heritage and an essential component of everyone's cultural identity. In this era of accelerated globalization, our cultural diversity must be protected and strengthened in the interest of all peoples." Mr. Walden added, "The use of mother tongues serves not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education, but also develops fuller awareness about linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and inspires solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue."

Further information about International Mother Language Day and UNESCO's activities to promote cultural and linguistic diversity is available on UNESCO's web site at www.unesco.org/culture.

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Source :

Alysouk Lynhiavu
Public Affairs Officer
(613) 566-4414, ext. 4532
alysouk.lynhiavu@unesco.ca