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Statement of ICOM Germany concerning the devastating fire in the National Museum of Brazil

The community of ICOM celebrated its General Conference 2013 in Rio de Janeiro and was thrilled by the hospitality of ICOM Brazil. The location of the city, its beautiful views to the seaside, its stunning mixture of historical and modern architecture and its vibrant combination of different cultures and influences made the stay unforgettable. Nonetheless we had a multitude of opportunities to learn about the difficult situation in museums across the country as well as within Rio. Many of the museums are very rich in the sense of their breathtaking collections, but the maintenance of the buildings, the climate conditions on the one hand and the limited possibilities of research, preservation and conservation on the other hand are more than limited due to budget issues. This comes now to a point, where it is more than obvious that even the options on protecting museums against catastrophes such as fire, waterflooding or earthquakes are more than limited. Many museums worldwide – this is not a specific Brazilian problem – are not prepared or even regularly trained for such situations. There is no emergency plan that regulates immediately the most urgent needs. It is a catastrophe that this loss of Brazil's most prestigious National Museum was blown away by a fire burst Monday night. It is the national treasure and it has been the treasure of the South-American continent. The loss hits the world community in its heart as more than 20 million items have been destroyed irretrievably. Supposedly not even digital records will record all objects.

We should ask ourselves what cultural relicts mean to us and how and where we would like to preserve our memories for now and for futures times. Museums are not only a place for storing objects, but they are a reflection of our own vision of mankind. This should be worth to maintain memories and to provide all means protection and support. It turned out to be irresponsible not to protect museums as nothing what is lost will return. The National Museum in Rio has been the leading museum in South America and a source of wisdom and knowledge.

The fire-situation spread immediately to all floors and left no chance for the helpers to move on forward. Our dear colleagues and the directors of the National Museum stressed constantly to the deficits and the problematic circumstances in the museum, for the unsecure safeness of the collections, especially for such possible situations. This has been addressed to the government, to those who have been in charge of culture. It has been always a decision of the Government not to provide enough money to improve the situation. It is a bitter truth that often the gap between those who are politically in charge and institutions do not match in the sense of taking responsibility for the cultural relicts and arts. It is on us as museum professionals to turn this situation and to involve the societies within this process.

The National Museum in Brazil should be rebuilt as soon as possible. The ICOM members and organization will support within this process.

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