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Press Handout

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Message by the Minister of Education, Dr. Louis Galea, on the occasion of the inauguration of the IKONOS Information & Communications Technology Centre and the launching of the first Introductory Course on Mediterranean Cultural Heritage and Conservation by distance learning at the Malta Centre for Restoration, Bighi on Saturday March 29th 2003 at 11H15.

Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Your Excellency The President Emeritus and Chairman of the Committee of Guarantee, Your Excellency the Ambassador of the European Commission, Your Excellencies the Ambassadors of Libya, Italy, the United Kingdom and France, Your Excellency the Ambassador of Malta to Algeria, Chancellor of the University of Malta, Chairman and Members of the Board of Governors of the Malta Centre for Restoration, it is a great pleasure for me to have this opportunity to be present at the inauguration of the IKONOS Information & Communications Technology Control Centre which is today also coinciding with the launch of the first Introductory Course on Mediterranean Cultural Heritage and Conservation to be broadcast by satellite from the Malta Centre for Restoration.

It was only sixteen short months ago, on the 7th December 2001, that I was here present for the signing of the contract between the Malta Centre for Restoration and the European Commission as a result of which the MCR

became the Contracting Authority for the IKONOS Project which it had been instrumental in designing. On that occasion, I explained that when, on the 26th April 1999, Cabinet approved the setting up of the Malta Centre for Restoration it encharged MCR with a dual role: that of being a regional centre as well as Malta's national centre. I described this as a modest but reasonable ambition since Malta's strategic position and rich cultural heritage make it ideally suited to take on a pivotal position in the development of cultural heritage conservation in the Mediterranean.

Less than six months ago, on the 12th November 2002, I was again present here at MCR in Bighi to witness the signing of the contract that was to provide the satellite communication services to the IKONOS consortium. On that date, in this very same room, we gave ourselves an appointment to meet here in March 2003 for the launch of the first broadcast sessions and I expressed my confidence that, given MCR's track record, I had little fear that the next project deadline will not be met.

Well, here we are today, as the project management science people would put it, "to specification, on budget, on time". And this in an incredibly complex project that has involved the logistics of importing, installing, commissioning and testing a V-SAT network and video-conferencing suites in Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Greece, Malta and the Netherlands. Not to mention co-ordinating tutors and some two hundred students spread across these countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am certain that you appreciate that today we are, in our own modest way, making history by inaugurating the world's first

satellite enabled Wide Area Network (or WAN as it is more commonly called) designed and implemented for use in cultural heritage and conservation. The twelve institutions from eight countries that have come together to form the IKONOS consortium now have the means to give lectures, hold seminars, share tutorials, collaborate on projects or beam back laser scanning data from the middle of the Jordanian desert and all this 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind one and all that, certainly for the Maltese, this project has reached the state it has today only thanks to Malta's European aspirations. The European Union has billions of euros voted for investment in cultural heritage and in information technology. Malta's application for membership and eventual membership of the European Union has opened the way to access these funds and inject them into a sector where Malta could ill afford to invest in the past.

For while I have described the MCR's role as a regional centre to be a reasonable ambition, it would become a hollow dream without the necessary funding to achieve such a vision. This is where EU programmes become so important for a country like Malta. A truly worth-while project like IKONOS which will help MCR develop into a regional centre would not have been possible without European funds. Instead, today, we are witnessing a project with an overall budget which is over three million Euros, 80% of which are provided by the European Union. The vision of a regional centre is being implemented thanks to hefty funding from the European Union and at a speed which is much faster had we to rely on Maltese funding alone.

I must conclude with a word of thanks to all members of the MCR team: the Board of Governors, members of management and the rest of the staff whose hard work has made today possible. Without their commitment and dedication very little would have been achieved to date. Today ten nationalities work here side by side on a full-time basis in what has rapidly become one of the largest and best-equipped conservation centers in the Mediterranean. IKONOS is a shining example of the benefits that international collaboration may bring resulting in a concrete contribution to the preservation of mankind's cultural heritage. I wish you well.