

## **UNESCO: Warns Heritage Sites in Mali, Arab World at Risk**

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UNITED NATIONS - The United Nations cultural organization, **UNESCO**, warns that world heritage sites in the West African country of Mali and in the Arab world are at risk of damage and theft as political upheaval sweeps through those states.

### **Destruction of historical manuscripts**

The ancient city of Timbuktu saw its golden age as an Islamic intellectual and spiritual center in the 15th and 16th centuries. Its three great mosques, the Djingareyber, Sankore and Sidi Yahia, still stand as a testament to that time. But now, UNESCO warns, they are under threat from rebel groups, including Tuaregs and the al-Qaida-linked Ansar Dine.

UNESCO Assistant Director-General Francesco Bandarin said Friday that in addition to the mosques and several mausoleums, Timbuktu also has one of the world's most important collections of ancient manuscripts.

“They have collected in Timbuktu in different collections, mostly private collections, a very large amount, over 30,000 manuscripts that are the most important library of religious and civil life in the Sahara. Also some of them are copied from previous times. It is an extremely important heritage of Islam and history there,” said Bandarin.

He said when the coup d'état began in late March the rebels did not loot the collections. But in mid-April, the situation worsened and some manuscripts were stolen from the Islamic research center in Timbuktu. He said UNESCO does not yet know how extensive the theft was.

UNESCO has warned Mali's neighbors to be on the look-out for trafficked manuscripts. Bandarin noted that the illegal trade in antiquities worldwide is a \$6 billion a year business, so that these treasures often end up on the black market and are sold to private collectors.

He said UNESCO sent a mission to Mali's capital, Bamako, on Thursday to look into the situation further.

Bandarin says that while the Arab Spring has been good for democracy, it has not necessarily been kind to world heritage sites in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria.

### **Priceless artifacts, gone**

In Libya, he points out that after the revolution ended, a priceless collection of more than 4,000 ancient Greek artifacts was looted from a bank vault in Benghazi. Some of the items were retrieved in Egyptian markets, but many remain missing.

In Egypt, he says the chaos of the past year has led to a surge in the construction of illegal homes, which can damage ancient sites.

“A site can be destroyed in many forms, and not necessarily by a bomb, it can be destroyed by development of buildings and so on,” noted Bandarin.

In Syria, where anti-government protests led to 15 months of political violence, Bandarin says UNESCO has not had any major reports of damage. But he is concerned about reports that the Syrian military is using the ancient Crac des Chevaliers fortress west of the flashpoint town of Homs, and Salah El-Din Castle east of Latakia as staging grounds for deployments.

He says because of the violence, UNESCO has been unable to send a team in to assess these sites.

For now, he says, UNESCO hopes to “raise the alert” that important world heritage sites are under threat from conflict. He says through public awareness the agency hopes to avert such past tragedies, such as when the Afghan Taliban blew up the two 6th century monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001.