

## LIBRARIES AT RISK

Ever and again libraries have been or are at risk and not a month goes by without IFLA (International Federation of Libraries Associations and Institutions) being warned of a new catastrophe. To list all the libraries that have sustained damage for one reason or another, or that are immediately threatened, would be a fastidious task and would only attract a limited interest.

Knowing those dangers, how to confront them, and how to minimise their causes and their effects in the future seems to be a more efficient process if the great number of libraries throughout the world is taken into account – along with the importance of their contents for collective memory.

When speaking of the dangers that threaten libraries it is important to make a distinction between the buildings, the collections, and the information they possess, each of these being the target of different and often specific risks.

### Natural versus Human Threats

A clear line must be drawn between unavoidable natural risks, and the catastrophes resulting from human actions. In the first category are found the great natural disasters: earthquakes, floods, fires, landslides, tidal waves, tsunamis, tempests, hurricanes, cyclones or typhoons. Even when appropriate preventive measures have been adopted, significant damages are seldom avoided. For example, IFLA has been brought-in to look at the destruction of a large part of the collections from the Franciscan library of Arequipa in Peru.

Among human-made catastrophes, armed conflicts are differentiated from disasters due to neglect. Wars between nations, civil wars and terrorism have represented, and keep doing so, a constant danger for libraries. Unfortunately, we can now observe the resolution of different warring factions to strengthen their military actions through the destruction of libraries. Libraries are considered to be the testifiers of an opposing culture, kept within books and other media. Libraries then become primary targets. Sarajevo has been a good example of this. However, in most cases, danger is encountered on a daily basis, usually the result of carelessness or of lack of means. It also comes from politicians' absence of concerns, and even more simply from the disrespect shown to cultural heritage. Floods, leakages of all kinds, fires and thefts that regularly damage and mutilate our libraries are all too common.

In regard to this worrying situation, it is important to make a distinction between libraries located in permanent risk areas, and libraries found in temporary risk areas. In the first case vigilance must be absolute, and preventive measures should be taken in order to limit unavoidable damages as extensively as possible. This is the case of every library situated in an earthquake area or in a region threatened by hurricanes. In the second case, the danger faced by libraries, although important, remains nonetheless momentary. This is the case of armed conflicts, and multiple examples have recently been encountered – whether in Kosovo, in Macedonia, in Sierra Leone or in East Timor, and Afghanistan of course.

### International Strengths – the ICBS

Are we then powerless to face these threats? Not really. From the end of World War II, and after having established the tremendous losses sustained by cultural heritage and by libraries in particular ('Lost Memory', Joan van Albada), UNESCO proposed a convention for the protection of cultural goods in the situation of armed conflict (The Hague Convention 1954). At the same time cultural organisations representing archives (ICA – International Council of Archives), libraries (IFLA – International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), museums (ICOM – International Council on Museums), monuments and sites (ICOMOS – International Council on Monuments and Sites), decided to unite their strengths to create the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) in 1996 in order to preserve cultural heritage, not only in cases of armed conflict but also against natural disasters. Moreover, UNESCO has favoured the growth of a new programme intended to preserve the 'World Memory'. This programme aims at protecting and saving important world documents, as well as at facilitating their access to a greater public and is mostly due to an active policy of numerical indexing.

Of course, IFLA is actively involved with the Blue Shield committees and with the 'World Memory' programme. IFLA is conscious of the fact that co-operation and prevention are the spearheads of effective action regarding the protection of cultural heritage.

How will IFLA accomplish this policy of protection and preservation? First of all it is essential to save the contents, especially when for inescapable reasons the containers themselves cannot be saved. Action must be simultaneously conducted on several fronts:

- Duplication of information on a replacing medium, and most of all storage of the copies in a different place from the originals. Special attention must be given to numerically indexed documents as well as to oral tradition. The harsh example of NASA's loss of the first recordings of its original expedition to the moon does not cease to haunt librarians' minds. As Amadou Ampatheba put it: 'In Africa, when an old man disappears it is an entire library that burns down'.
- Drawing-up collection inventories is also an absolute necessity. Indeed, how can a vanished collection possibly be built-up again if there is no record left of its content?
- Finally, awareness programmes concerning potential and unexpected risks have to be undertaken. They should be directed toward the greater public and professionals, but also toward decision makers, politicians, civil societies and the military. Thus, in order to increase the chances of success, a narrow collaboration among all the parties that belong to the cultural sector and of the relief agencies is necessary. The creation of the national committees of the Blue Shield, the elaboration and the up-to-datedness of emergency response plans, as well as signature to The Hague Convention's Second Protocol by the greatest number of Member States will, in the long term, constitute the best prevention.

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