



Blowing-up of the Western Buddha, March 2001

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## **UNESCO's Activities for the Safeguarding of Bamiyan**

On 26 February 2001, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan issued the following edict from the City of Kandahar: *On the basis of consultations between the religious leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the religious judgments of the Ulema and the rulings of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, all statues and non-Islamic shrines located in the different parts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed. These statues have been and remain shrines of infidels and these infidels continue to worship and respect these shrines. Allah almighty is the only real shrine and all false shrines should be smashed. Therefore, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has ordered all the representatives of the Ministry of the Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice and of the Ministry of Information and Culture to destroy all the statues. As ordered, by the Ulema and the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, all statues must*

*be annihilated so that no one can worship or respect them in the future.*

As soon as this order was made public, UNESCO issued appeals to the Taliban leaders, exhorting them to preserve the Afghan cultural heritage. These appeals were widely carried by the international press. The Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura addressed a personal letter to the Taliban leader, Mollah Omar, on 28 February. The Director-General also obtained the full support of the Islamic countries for UNESCO's activities to save the Afghan cultural heritage. On 1<sup>st</sup> March, Mr. Pierre Lafrance, Special Representative of the Director-General, left for Islamabad, Kandahar, Kabul, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. A number of Moslem religious leaders from Egypt, Iraq and Pakistan intervened at the request of UNESCO, issuing *fatwas* against the Taliban's order. The Director-General personally contacted the Presidents of Egypt and of Pakistan, as well as

of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, all of whom tried to use their influence to persuade the Taliban to cancel the order. Following these interventions, a delegation of 11 international Moslem leaders went to Kandahar in order to try to convince Mollah Omar that the Koran does not prescribe the destruction of statues.

UNESCO launched an international petition for the safeguarding of the Afghan cultural heritage on its web site, and a special Funds-in-Trust account has been created for this purpose. The crisis gained a great deal of international media attention and UNESCO also received many letters of support for its actions in this matter from heads of state, ministers, other international organizations and individuals. Nevertheless, all these political and religious interventions proved to be in vain, and the Taliban destroyed not only the Buddhas at Bamiyan, but also a large number of statues throughout Afghanistan.

After the destruction, in December 2001, an international conference of *Ulema*, Islamic religious leaders, was jointly organized with the OIC, ISESCO and ALECSO, to examine the position of the Moslem world towards the preservation of Islamic and non-Islamic heritage. This conference resulted in a clear declaration of principles in favour of the protection of cultural heritage, including statues that can be appealed to in the future...

In May 2002, UNESCO organized, in cooperation with the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, the first International Seminar on the Rehabilitation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, held in Kabul, which gathered 107 specialists in Afghan cultural heritage, as well as representatives of donor countries and institutions. Under the chairmanship of H. E. Dr. Makhdoum Raheen, Minister of Information and Culture of the Afghan Government, the participants gave presentations on the state of conservation of cultural sites across the country and discussed programmes and co-ordination for the first conservation measures to be taken. This Seminar resulted in more than US\$ 7 million being pledged for priority projects, allocated through bilateral agreements and UNESCO Funds-in-Trust projects. An eleven-page document containing concrete recommendations for future action was adopted, in which the need to ensure effective cooperation was emphasized.

First international seminar on the rehabilitation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage, 27-29 May 2002



To this end and following the Afghan authorities' request to UNESCO to play a coordinating role in all international activities aimed at the safeguarding of Afghanistan's cultural heritage, UNESCO has established an International Coordination Committee. The statutes of this Committee were approved by the 165<sup>th</sup> session of the Organization's Executive Board in October 2002. The Committee consists of Afghan experts and leading international specialists belonging to the most important donor countries and organizations providing funds or scientific assistance for the safeguarding of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. It meets on a regular basis to review on-going and future efforts to rehabilitate Afghanistan's cultural heritage. From 16 to 18 June 2003, the First Plenary Session of this Committee was organized at UNESCO Headquarters. The meeting was chaired by H. E. Dr. Makhdoum Raheen, Minister of Information and Culture, in the presence of His Highness Prince Mirwais, seven representatives of the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, and of more than 60 international experts, participating as Members of the Committee or as Observers.

The meeting resulted in concrete recommendations, which allowed the efficient coordination of actions to safeguard Afghanistan's cultural heritage to the highest international conservation standards. These recommendations concern key areas, such as the development of a long-term strategy, capacity building, the implementation of the World Heritage Convention and the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, national inventories and documentation, as well as the rehabilitation of the National Museum in Kabul, the safeguarding of the sites of Jam, Herat, and Bamiyan. Several donors pledged additional funding for cultural projects in Afghanistan during and following the meeting.

Immediately after the collapse of the Taliban regime in December 2001, UNESCO sent a mission to Bamiyan to assess the condition of the site and to cover the remaining large stone blocks with fibreglass sheets protecting them from harsh climatic conditions during winter. In July 2002, a second UNESCO mission jointly organized with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

Meeting in Kabul, May 2002. From left to right: Henrik Lilius, Michael Petzet, President Hamid Karzai, Mounir Bouchenaki



and directed by its president, Professor Michael Petzet, was undertaken in order to prepare conservation measures at the Bamiyan site.

A project preparation mission to Bamiyan composed of German, Italian and Japanese experts was then undertaken from 27 September to 6 October 2002. It was noted that over 80% of the mural paintings dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD in the Buddhist caves have disappeared, either through neglect or looting. In one cave, experts even found tools of the thieves and the remains of freshly removed paintings.

In response to this situation, a contract was concluded with the local commander, who immediately provided ten armed guards to be responsible for the permanent surveillance of the site, and no further thefts were noted since. It was also noted with concern that large cracks have appeared in and around the niches where the Buddha statues had previously been situated, which could lead to the collapse of parts of the niches and inner stair cases. In response to this situation, the experts carried out complementary measurements and advised on appropriate actions to consolidate the cliffs and the niches. As a result of this mission, the Japanese Foreign Ministry generously approved a UNESCO Funds-in-Trust for the Safeguarding of the Bamiyan site with a total budget of \$1,815,967. ICOMOS financed the restoration of a Sunni mosque and another building, both of which are located in close proximity to the niche of the large Buddha. The fore-mentioned building is now used to accommodate the guards, and to store the project equipment.<sup>3</sup>



Destruction of the Eastern Buddha [Al-Jazeera]

## Notes

- 1 The following text is an abstract of H@R 2000, pp. 39–41 and H@R 2001/2002, pp. 25f.
- 2 Issue 6, May 2000; see also the reports on Afghanistan in *Archaeologia*, No. 365, March 2000, pp. 14–29, and James Lewis: *Afghanistan: the wounds of war*, in: *Sources*, May 2000, No. 123, pp. 13f.
- 3 Taken from Christian Manhart: *UNESCO's activities for the safeguarding of Bamiyan*, in: Claudio Margottini (ed.): *The Destruction of the Giant Buddha Statues in Bamiyan*, Viterbo 2009, pp. 39–41.