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THE BUDDHA STATUES IN THE BAMIYAN VALLEY, AFGHANISTAN


UNESCO ACTION FOR THE SAFEGUARD OF THE STATUES OF
BUDDHA AND THE PREVENTION OF FUTURE INTENTIONAL
DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Excellency President of the UNESCO General Conference,

Excellency Deputy-Minister of Culture of Afghanistan

Excellency Mrs. Governor of Bamiyan Province,

Excellencies Ambassadors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nearly 10 years have passed since the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, in Afghanistan.

I would like to make a brief presentation about the actions undertaken by UNESCO, at the time, to attempt to save these exceptional statues.

Afghanistan, situated at the crossroads of the historic silk roads and celebrated for its unique cultural heritage, reflects a past marked by the multiple influences of Persia, Greece, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

Among its numerous treasures, it includes the monumental Buddhas sculpted in the cliffs of Bamiyan, probably during the 5th century A.D. Sadly, Afghanistan’s cultural heritage has suffered cruelly from the conflicts and disasters that have wrought the country for more than a quarter century.

The irreplaceable collections of the Kabul Museum, as well as numerous historical and archaeological sites, have been the victim of pillage and vandalism. But the most dramatic destruction was that decided by the chief of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, on 26 February 2001.

1. **How did UNESCO learn of this decision?**

UNESCO received news through a telephone call from the Greece's Ambassador to Pakistan, then on mission to Afghanistan in order to meet with the Taliban government of Afghanistan.

I was accompanying the former UNESCO Director General, Mr. Koichi Matsuura, on an official visit to Algeria when I received a call from my colleague Mme Lyndel Prott, Director of the Division of Cultural Heritage. She informed me of the message from the Greek ambassador, which I immediately relayed to the Director General.

During the return flight from Algiers to Paris, Mr. Matsuura asked me to deal with the issue and to propose rapidly a strategy for response. It was not the first time that the Afghan Taliban authorities had issued such menaces.
The threat had been raised in 1998, and UNESCO, through its preceding Director General, Federico Mayor, had called for respect of this millennial heritage. At that time, a Taliban commander had already attacked the head of the smaller Buddha and placed explosives at the base of the niches housing both Buddhas.

In July 1999, Mullah Omar issued a decree for the protection of the Buddhas. According to a journalist with the Guardian, Mullah Omar noted “that there are no more Buddhists in Afghanistan and that statues could be an example of a potential major source of income for the nation, from international visitors” (Luke Harding, The Guardian, 3 March 2001).

On his return to Paris (after official mission to Algeria, 26-28 February 2001), the UNESCO Director General, Koïchiro Matsuura, termed the new decision to destroy the Afghanistan statues a “true cultural disaster”, and demanded that the Afghans instantly halt the destruction of this invaluable world heritage.

He specifically stated: “To blindly destroy the statues will not alter history, only deprive the future Afghanistan of one of its riches. I ask that all those concerned, and the highest leader of the Afghans themselves, to immediately take all measures for the protection of this unique cultural heritage. The loss of any Afghan statues, and particularly the Buddhas of Bamiyan, would be a loss for all humanity”.

He continued that “The authors of such an irredeemable act would bear a heavy historic responsibility to the Afghan people” and concluded that “It is not in this kind of action that they will gain credibility in public opinion or in the international community”.

2. The immediate reaction of UNESCO to Mullah Omar’s decision

On March 1st, the Director General organised a number of meetings with the Permanent Delegates to UNESCO, particularly those from the Asian countries where Buddhist communities were shocked by this news from Afghanistan, and those representing the Islamic countries. These meetings were under added tension because of the fact that the Taliban had chosen to announce their decision one week before Aïd-el-Kébir (also called Aïd el Adha), one of the most important Islamic religious festivals, commemorating the Sacrifice of Abraham. This meant that most Islamic nations were already occupied with vacation, and that the pilgrimage to Mecca had begun for Saudi Arabia.

This timing with respect to the religious calendar would continue to create difficulties in the contacts between the UNESCO Secretariat and a number of authorities in the Islamic world.

Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura then formed a crisis unit at his cabinet level, gathering Mme Françoise Rivière, Chief of Cabinet, Mr. Ahmed Sayyad, Assistant Director General for External Relations, Mr. Francesco Bandarin, Director of the World Heritage Centre, and
myself, as Assistant Director General for Culture. The Director-General nominated me as coordinator of actions to respond to the order for the destruction of the Bamiyan statues.

On March 1, I established contact with the former French Ambassador to Pakistan, Mr. Pierre Lafrance, who knew Afghanistan well and speaks one of the languages of this country. He immediately accepted the proposal by the Director General to act as his Special Envoy to Afghanistan.

In less than 24 hours, thanks to the support of the Minister of Foreign Affairs for France and the Minister of the Interior for Pakistan, Mr. Lafrance arrived in Kandahar, where most of the members of the Taliban government were gathered. French President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, sent a letter of congratulations to the Director General of UNESCO for having chosen Ambassador Pierre Lafrance for such a delicate mission.

On March 2nd, 2001, at the opening of the International Colloquium on Central Asian Heritage, at UNESCO headquarters, and which happened by chance at this crisis moment on Afghanistan, Mr. Matsuura declared “I have chosen a person who is well known and respected in the region, with great knowledge of issues in the Middle East and Central Asia.” At the same colloquium, the Director General was able to provide an update on the initiatives that had already been taken to “reverse the absurd direction that the Kabul authorities have initiated.”

Within the Secretariat for the UNESCO Culture Sector I formed a working group composed of Mme Paola Leoncini-Bartoli, Chief of the Executive Office for the ADG/CLT and Mr. Christian Manhart, Programme Specialist, who assisted me in contacts with the various permanent delegations and principal NGOs specialised in safeguarding cultural heritage (ICOMOS and ICOM), as well as the Society for Protection of Afghan Cultural Heritage (SPACH).

I would like to stress that this was a true race against time to respond as effectively as possible to the decision for the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, before the day of Aïd el Adha, which was fixed on 8th of March.

During a meeting with the media on March 6, 2001, I listed the activities for the safeguard of Afghan heritage that had been led or supported by UNESCO over recent years and discussed the possibility of creation of a special assistance fund for Afghan monuments. In that occasion, I insisted on the fact that the Taliban decision met with unanimous condemnation in all parts of the world, including both the nations with a notable Buddhist community and the Islamic nations, and that the latter indicated there was no serious religious argument that could serve as a basis for such an iconoclastic act.

With the authority and support of the UNESCO Director General, a series of actions were undertaken to mobilize political and religious personalities that could influence the Taliban. Thus, the Arab Group at UNESCO issued, at the outset of the crisis, a communiqué calling for “international mobilization for concrete actions to end this unprecedented gesture, which concerns invaluable treasures of universal value”.
I would note that Ambassador Pierre Lafrance had telephoned from Kandahar to inform me that in spite of his meeting with the Minister of Culture and Minister of Religious Affairs of the Taliban government, the decision to destroy the Buddhas was completely related to religious interpretations and that he was thus not an appropriate intervener.

However, he continued his mission as the UNESCO Director General’s Special Envoy by travelling to Saudi Arabia, a country which might have some influence concerning the Taliban behaviour, then returning to Paris to report to the Director General.

With the support of the Arab and Muslim Ambassadors to UNESCO (and particularly Iran, Morocco, Qatar, Syria), I succeeded in discussing the facts with important Islamic religious authorities, who would then go on to express a point of view contrary to that of the Afghan Taliban. I would like to note, and express my own sincere thanks, for the important role played by the Ambassadors of those countries who worked devotedly alongside UNESCO in these efforts:

HE Ms Aziza Bennani, Ambassador of Morocco to UNESCO, facilitated my contacts with the Secretary General of the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), Dr. Abdelhouahed Belakziz.

HE Mr. Ahmed Jalali, Ambassador of Iran to UNESCO, as an expert of philosophy and Islamic thought, provided me with important bibliographic references, and in particular a text of a scholar of the XII century, called Al Biruni, who visited Bamiyan.

HE. Mr. Ali Zainal, Ambassador of Qatar to UNESCO, facilitated the contacts with Qatari Authorities arranging very rapidly a special flight to Afghanistan;

and H.E. the late Mr. Amine Esber, Ambassador of Syria to UNESCO, who gave me an invaluable assistance in organizing the meeting of experts in Islamic Law that was then held in Doha in December 2001.

Thanks to such support, I was able to contact and speak personally with Sheikh Youssef Kardaoui, in Doha (Qatar), one of the most respected presently living religious personages of the Arab world, and to persuade him to travel to Afghanistan.

Sheikh Youssef Kardaoui stated “The statues made by the elders who came before Islam are part of a historic patrimony. When the Muslims penetrated Afghanistan, in the first century of Hijra, these statues were already there, and they were not destroyed. I advised our brothers of the Taliban movement to reconsider their decision in light of the danger of its negative impact”.

For his part, Sabri Abdel-Raouf, Chief of the Division of Islamic Studies at Al-Azhar University (Cairo), stated that “statues intended for worship can be forbidden as contrary to Islam but statues that are not worshipped are not forbidden”.

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Through intercession by Mr. Mufid Shihab, then Egypt’s Minister of Higher Education, and President of the Egyptian National Commission for UNESCO, whom I implored, as a friend, to help towards a solution for the crisis, the UNESCO Director General was able to speak by telephone with President Hosni Mubarak, who immediately accepted to facilitate the mission of a delegation of Egyptian religious authorities to Kandahar, on 8 March 2001, in order to persuade the Taliban authorities over their concerns for errors in interpreting Islamic law. I was present during this conversation in proposing “Sheikh Al Azhar”, the Rector of the oldest Islamic University in Cairo. But, I quote President Hosni Mubarak who replied: “Mr. Director General, not only Sheikh Al Azhar, but also Mufti Masr would go to change the mind of the Taliban!”

With the further invaluable assistance of Qatar’s Ambassador, a religious delegation of 15 personalities was formed, and was able to go to Afghanistan. It was headed by Dr Nasr Farid Wassel, Mufti of Egypt, including: the Adjunct Secretary General for Political Affairs of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, Ibrahim Baker; Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradaoui, of Doha; Sheikh Mohamed al Raoui, Ulema (scholar) of the Al Azhar University; the well-known Islamic writer, Fahmi al-Hoaydi, and other specialists in Sharia (Islamic law).

This delegation was able to meet with the Taliban Minister of Religious Affairs and the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs, travelling by means of an aircraft provided to UNESCO by H.E. the Emir of Qatar, Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani. But the delegation was unable to meet Mullah Omar, nor to convince the religious authorities to renounce the application of the decree for the demolition, and the two Buddhas were destroyed between 9 and 11 March 2001, meaning at the close of the festival of Aid el Adha.

In my try to reach the Head of the Taliban regime in order to reverse his order, I was given the name of an Egyptian colleague who was a civil servant of the World Health Organization (WHO), and among the very few persons having approached and known Mollah Omar. After contacting him by phone and explaining the gravity of the situation, he kindly agreed to write a letter in Arabic to Mollah Omar, and made sure it would reach him. In this letter he was trying to convince the Taliban leader that such a behavior against the cultural heritage of his own country cannot be justified by the religion. We have a copy of this letter in the UNESCO Archives.

Furthermore, I should note that I had established contact with Ms Atya Inayatullah, past President of the UNESCO Executive Board, and then Pakistan’s Minister of Social Affairs with whom I raised the possibility of an intervention by President Pervez Musharraf. She had answered that, unfortunately, he was not in Islamabad and was actually in pilgrimage to Mecca. She also went to Khandahar with the Minister of Interior of Pakistan in a last attempt to convince the Talibans. Unfortunately, even this ultimate mission failed.
3. Lessons learned by UNESCO

In conflict and post-conflict situations, heritage is the object of contradictory tensions between “sanctions” and “reconciliation”. The 17 “October 2003 Declaration concerning intentional destruction of cultural heritage” of the two Bouddhas reinforces a strong body of two pre-existing conventions and two protocols that establish judicial requirements for protection of cultural heritage. The preparation of this Declaration during the Year 2002-2003 was one of the first decisions from UNESCO after having failed to stop the destruction of the two giant Bouddhas of the Bamyan Valley.

The experience gained by UNESCO through events in Cambodia, southeast Europe, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle East and Eastern Timor (now Timor-Leste), leads to hope that a programme can be put into place for the preservation of cultural heritage, with corresponding objectives of reconstruction on the one hand and dialogue and reconciliation on the other.

To respond to the numerous questions that UNESCO received after the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, to end the false interpretations of Islamic law concerning cultural heritage and also to prevent such an act in the future, a conference of specialists in Islamic law was organized in Doha (Qatar), from 29 to 31 December 2001, on the occasion of the regular meeting of the Ministers of Culture of the Islamic World.

We started the preparation of this Conference immediately after what was qualified as a “crime against culture”, from 15th of March onwards. Contacts were made with the most renowned specialists in Islamic Law (Sharia) from the different religious schools (Sunna and Shia) and from Morocco, in the western Islamic World up to Kazakhstan in its Eastern part. Several studies were presented on one item proposed for the Agenda of the Conference: Islam and Cultural Heritage.

The Doha Conference of ‘Ulama on Islam and Cultural Heritage was chaired by His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, and organized by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) and by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and inaugurated by the three Directors Generals: Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Mr. Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri and Mr Mongi Bousnina.

It is to be noted that this Conference was attended by 27 Professors and Experts in Islamic Law from 25 countries. In attendance was also a delegation from Afghanistan led by Professor Sibghat-Ullah Mojededdi, former President of Afghanistan.

It gave rise to the “Declaration of Doha” widely disseminated in the Islamic countries. The Proceedings of this Conference have been published in Arabic and English in April 2005.

In conclusion I want to underline that Cultural Heritage is more and more perceived to be a priority during post-conflict reconstruction. “The biggest challenge is facing UNESCO,” said its Director General Koichiro Matsuura, “is to make the public...
authorities, the private sector, and civil society as a whole realize that the cultural heritage is not only an instrument for peace and reconciliation but also a factor of development”.

This message dates to 2002, on the occasion of the United Nations’ Year for Cultural Heritage. Ten years later such a statement remains a critical point of reference.

Increasingly, conflicts target symbols of culture so as to destroy a people’s identity. This destruction can often lead the international community to react. In the wake of the destruction of cultural heritage during World War II, the international community responded with the 1954 Hague Convention. Since then, the nature of warfare has changed, with conflict becoming less a matter of external belligerents and more one of internal conflict.

During these internal conflicts, warring parties often specifically target cultural heritage. The Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention, dated 1999, was written to address this changing nature of conflict, and the international community must continue to identify proper mechanisms to respond to the growing demand for the preservation of heritage badly damaged during such conflicts.

Thank you for your attention.

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