

BERNAMA - Arab Foreign Ministers Condemn Cultural Cleansing Of Heritage Landmarks



Arab Foreign Ministers Condemn Cultural Cleansing Of Heritage Landmarks

By Manik Mehta

NEW YORK, Sept 25 (Bernama) -- Foreign ministers of a number of Arab countries unanimously condemned the "cultural cleansing" of heritage landmarks, carried out last month by the terrorist group IS (Islamic State) in the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria and other places, and also over a decade ago by the Taliban in Bamayan, Afghanistan.

Meeting Thursday at a forum at the Asia Society in New York -- the event was co-hosted by Asia Society president Josette Sheeran and Antiquities Coalition chairperson Deborah Lehr - to discuss regional solutions to the recent surge in the destruction and looting of antiquities across the Middle East.

The speakers included UNESCO director general Irina Bokova, Ibrahim Al-Jaafari, the Iraqi foreign minister, Nasser Judeh, Jordan's deputy prime minister and foreign minister, Egyptian foreign minister Sameh Hassan Shoukry, and Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop. Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, who is currently the president of Asia Society's Policy Institute, moderated the discussion.

The destruction of Palmyra was accompanied by looting museums and demolishing millennia-old structures such as the 2,000-year-old Temple of Bel. As militants searched for artifacts, they captured the 82-year-old renowned antiquities scholar Khaled al-Asaad, who was tortured and beheaded for his refusal to lead his captors to more treasures.

Bokova made an emotional appeal to stop what she called the "cultural cleansing" - the term caught on with the panelists, with Rudd also using it to highlight the destruction of the cultural heritage.

She called for "strengthening the fabric of law to preserve our cultural heritage".

"No one responsible for cultural destruction should remain unpunished because it is as bad as killing people," she said.

Shoukry, reminding of the possibility of Da'esh - or ISIL, as it is called in UN parlance - destroying an ancient Roman city in Libya, urged the international community to act

against the destruction of heritage landmarks and stop the antiquities smuggling.

The upheavals of the Arab Spring of 2011 was followed by the rise of terror groups like IS, with countries throughout the Middle East facing a proliferation of instances of cultural destruction and antiquities trafficking, the latter used to finance terrorism.

According to Egyptian sources, Egypt alone saw an increase of between 500 and 1,000 per cent in looting at major archeological sites; Antiques Coalitions estimates that US\$3 billion losses were incurred due to cultural racketeering.

Judeh, Jordan's deputy prime minister and foreign minister said that terrorists were intimidated by history which delegitimised them.

"They are pure and simple criminals killers because they are destroying the artefacts "

Bishop said that destroying a group's heritage and history weakened traditional communal bonds, "leaving individuals 'orphaned and empty in a cold world," which makes them ideal potential converts for a movement like Daesh.

Al-Jaafari called for regional cooperation between neighbouring countries to protect antiquities and protect the human legacy while Inigo Lambertini said that terrorists were intimidated by history, but they were also very interested in money.

"Basically what's happening in Palmyra is not only the destruction of cultural heritage, but also a boom in illicit trafficking of historic artifacts, " he said.

Historical artifacts are a major source of funding supporting groups like Da'esh. Antiquities Coalition estimates that just \$1 million can be enough to supply the group with more than 11,000 AK-47 machine guns or 1,250 rocket launchers.

The second part of the discussion, moderated by Asia President Sheeran and Antiquities Coalition chairperson Deborah Lehr, focused on preventing smuggling of antiquities and cutting off financing of terrorism.

Another participant Col. Matthew Bogdanos argued that existing methods of prevention of smuggling and terrorism financing are largely ineffective, but also warned against relying on Western military aid as a solution. "Boots on the ground is not a cure," he said.

-- BERNAMA

[>> Newslist](#)

[Purchase This News](#) 

***We provide (subscription-based)
news coverage in our [Newswire](#) service.***

Get a grasp on local business happenings and economic development with

MALAYSIA*eBiz* Weekly