

UN says destruction of Mideast historical sites 'war crime'

HAMZA HENDAWI | May 13, 2015

CAIRO (AP) — The chief of the U.N.'s education and culture agency launched a dramatic appeal in Cairo on Wednesday, saying that the destruction and looting of archaeological sites in the Middle East — such as the rampage perpetrated by the Islamic State group in Iraq — should be condemned as a "war crime."

UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova of Bulgaria also told the inaugural session of a conference that opened in Egypt that the theft and destruction of antiquities in the region was a tactic of war.

The conference is being held in response to the destruction of ancient temples and artifacts in Iraq by the extremist Islamic State group as well as the looting and smuggling of antiquities in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya.

"The stakes are high," declared Bokova. "The destruction and looting of archaeological sites and museums have reached unprecedented levels. The destruction of cultural heritage, the cultural cleansing, is being used as a tactic of war to terrify populations, to finance criminal activities and to spread hatred."

"We must consider it for what it is: A war crime," she stressed at the gathering of 10 Arab nations in Cairo.

Recent videos on social media showing Islamic State militants destroying ancient artifacts in Iraq's museums and blowing up 3,000-year-old temples and forever destroying priceless heritage have sent shockwaves through the archaeological community and international organizations.

In some of the videos, militants can be seen taking sledge hammers to the iconic winged-bulls of Assyria and sawing apart floral reliefs in the palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Nimrud before the entire site is destroyed with explosives.

Experts speculate that the large pieces are destroyed with sledgehammers and drills for the benefit of the cameras, while the more portable items like figurines, masks and ancient clay cuneiform tablets are smuggled to dealers in Turkey from where they make their way to the antiquities' black market.

The Islamic State controls large swathes of territory in Iraq and neighboring Syria, an area that is home to priceless historical treasures. Deborah Lehr of the Antiquities Coalition, the group behind the Cairo conference, said the militants' trade in artifacts smuggled out of Syria and Iraq was valued at billions of dollars.

The extremists, Lehr said, were posting these images to "intimidate those who enjoy beliefs that are contrary to their very narrow views and to fund their nefarious causes."

The problem is not restricted to Iraq and Syria.

Lehr said estimates put at \$3 billion the value of historical artifacts looted or produced from illegal digs and smuggled abroad in the four years of turmoil since the popular uprising in Egypt that toppled the rule of longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

Libya, which has been in much worse turmoil since the revolt against dictator Moammar Gadhafi in 2011, is thought to be suffering from the same problem, but there were no estimates of the value of its illicit trade in antiquities.

