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2004:
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Bam and ICOMOS – Human tragedy and professional solidarity

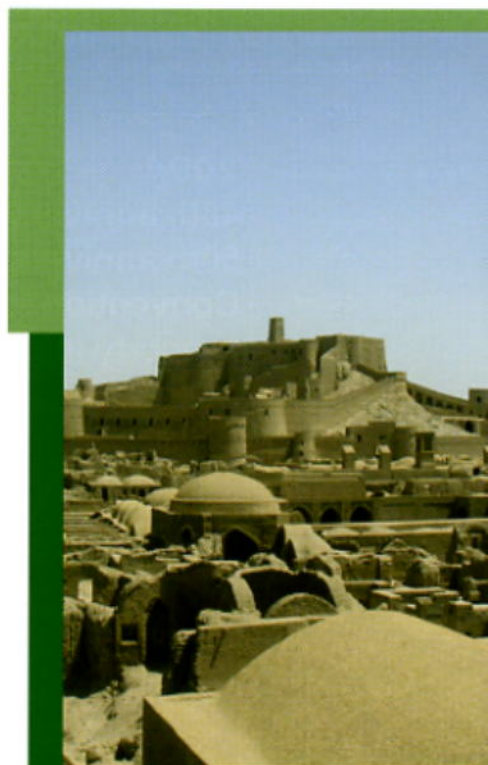
On 26th December 2003, an earthquake struck the historic oasis of Bam, in Iran. The disaster claimed over 40,000 victims, that is to say 40% of the population. Measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale, with a strong vertical component, the earthquake caused significant damage to buildings, particularly to modern concrete or steel structures, while sparing numerous traditional earthen constructed buildings.

Little known, except to experts such as the participants of the Terra conference who visited the area in December 2003, Bam gave rise to a spontaneous impulse of solidarity among heritage professionals, in addition to the humanitarian solidarity shown towards the tried population. With a history spanning 25 centuries, Bam possesses an important heritage which Iran wishes to have recognized as having an exceptional universal value. This heritage consists of archaeological properties such as Arg-e-Bam, an old fortified city entirely constructed from earth covering 20 hectares - one of the most impressive achievements of its kind - but also twenty listed monuments in the city which include the bazaar with its mosque and hammam. The landscape of date palm and orange tree plantations with their rammed clay walls and dwellings, irrigated by 165 qanats, carries a strong identity and is equally significant. All this was damaged to varying degrees and these damages are raising conservation questions; for example, the resistance of earthen structures to earthquakes, the management of the debris and the fortuitous archaeological discoveries.

The international bodies reacted rapidly to the earthquake. Both

UNESCO and ICOMOS contacted the Iranian authorities to communicate their condolences and their willingness to help. This is how, in agreement with our President, colleagues and the Iranian authorities, so as to avoid all forms of disaster tourism, I was able to go to Iran from 5th to 9th January, meet with the governmental authorities, the local UNESCO representative, the colleagues of ICOMOS Iran and quickly visit the citadel on 7th January to observe its state and the enormous challenge that the stabilisation and the restoration of this heritage represents. This visit also gave me the opportunity to note to what extent the earthen architecture had relatively well resisted to the earthquake compared to the buildings of modern or mixed structures. This was only a first exploration. Subsequently, official missions of UNESCO visited the site accompanied by experts associated with ICOMOS.

We must recognize the actions taken by the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation (ICHO). A few hours following the earthquake, the ICHO teams arrived on site to rescue the local staff. ICHO created working groups to secure the site, document the damages and coordinate the international assistance in favour of the heritage. In addition,



The historic citadel of Arg-e-Bam in Iran before and after the devastating earthquake of December 2003 (Photo: Eric Laporte, Canada)

jointly with ICOMOS and the support of UNESCO, the Japanese government and the World Bank, ICHO organised an international workshop in Bam, from 17th to 20th April, to mark the International Day of Monuments and Sites. This workshop brought together Iranian and international experts and volunteers, several of which were put forward by ICOMOS committees, and examined the effect of the earthquake on these earthen structures, whose role in causing deaths has been exaggerated, and recommended preventive measures applicable to earthen heritage in Iran or elsewhere, to improve its para-seismic performance whilst respecting its authenticity. The workshop will also help to clarify the conservation philosophy that will be applied, which ICHO wishes to be more respectful of the documentary

