

LEBANON

Cultural Heritage Threatened by the War in Lebanon in 2006

During the war in July and August 2006 devastating damages were caused above all to villages in the south of Lebanon. According to estimates made by the UN, at the end of the fights in mid-August 2006 c. 37.5 million square metres of land were contaminated by Israeli cluster bombs. With a statement of 21 July 2006 on the threatened cultural property in the Middle East conflict ICBS, the International Committee of the Blue Shield, which also includes ICOMOS and ICOM, called upon Israel, Lebanon and all parties concerned to respect the provisions of the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954). About damages by rockets that hit sites in Israel see the report on pages 96/97.

The following account which sums up the war damages in Lebanon was published by our partner organisation ICOM in *ICOM News* no. 3 (2006):

In July and August 2006, the war in Lebanon caused tragic human losses, as well as massive damage to its infrastructure, environment, and heritage. While acknowledging that human casualties are more important than heritage, we also appreciate that cultural patrimony is in danger not only in Lebanon, but for the rest of the world. It is our legacy and duty to protect it as the memory of humankind. While there are conventions such as that of Geneva for the protection of human rights, we are also fortunate to have the Hague Convention to help protect cultural property in the event of the armed conflicts.

In Lebanon, villages with traditional homes have been swept away. These are not only part of a tangible heritage, but also an intangible one of artisans passing down traditions of artefact production from one generation to the next. Such knowledge, once lost, is lost forever.

Moreover, Byblos, Baalbek, and Tyre, all three UNESCO World Heritage sites, have been affected by the war. The walls of Byblos'

ancient Phoenician harbour are covered by an oil slick; the Roman Temples of Bacchus and Jupiter in Baalbek have enlarged fissures due to the vibrations caused by bombings. Damage also occurred to the old souk of Baalbek and wrecked ten of its traditional shops. In Tyre some of the painted frescoes found in its Roman tomb came partly unstuck and required urgent restoration. In addition, the Museum of Al-Khiyam in Southern Lebanon was completely destroyed in the first days of the conflict.

Mr Frédéric Husseini, the Director General of Antiquities and President of ICOM-Lebanon, stated during the conflict that "preventive measures have been taken to put the museum collections in safe places and to remain in contact with the guardians of the archaeological sites." UNESCO's Director General issued a warning to Israel and Lebanon to respect the Hague Convention, which both states have ratified.

Heritage in all its forms – natural, cultural, and archaeological – must be saved, cherished, and preserved if the Lebanese, as those elsewhere in the world, wish to preserve the cultural memory forming part of their identity. Once heritage is destroyed, the damage is irreversible. In September 2006, a UNESCO mission headed by Mounir Bouchenaki, new Director of ICCROM, published its report stating that the World Heritage sites were largely intact and that "the most serious damage resulting from the conflict concerns the World Heritage site of Byblos, which was affected by the oil spill from the fuel tanks of the Jiyeh power plant, an ecological problem for a large area of the eastern Mediterranean (...)" The Directorate General of Antiquities faces a great deal of urgent consolidation and restoration work as a result of these tragic events and the museum community is encouraged to follow through with international assistance efforts.

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Baalbek, Roman temple of Bacchus and Jupiter (Photo: Pete Crow)