

UNESCO Cultural Activities in Afghanistan

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prepared by Masanori NAGAOKA
Consultant for Culture, UNESCO Office Kabul

Introduction

UNESCO's Mandate

Over many thousands of years, Afghanistan has been the home of many civilizations and different religions. Its rich historical culture has played a great and important role in the heritage of humankind. Over many generations, Afghanistan has attracted the attention of many historians, archaeologists, and an endless variety of scholarly researchers. Unfortunately, the economic, social, and cultural foundations of this country have been subject to tragic abuse and destruction over two decades of war and civil unrest. As a consequence, the country's cultural heritage has suffered irreversible damage and loss.

The rehabilitation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage is one of the main priorities of the Government of Afghanistan and the international community. The challenge to rehabilitate the country's endangered cultural heritage is overwhelming, requiring significant mobilization of international and national support for the Afghan authorities and people. It is for this reason that the Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan requested the international community to provide assistance and co-operation to meet this challenge through UNESCO.

In January 2002, UNESCO was officially requested by Afghan Authorities to play a coordinating role in all international and bilateral activities aimed at safeguarding Afghanistan's cultural heritage. As a first step, in March 2002 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, which entrusted UNESCO with the coordination of international efforts for the National Museum of Kabul.

The foundation of UNESCO's approach towards the Afghan crisis is the need to help Afghanistan to help itself. Leadership of Afghanistan's recovery and rehabilitation process must rest with Afghans themselves. While external support is clearly vital, lasting peace and security must be developed and sustained from within.

Activities

UNESCO's Current Activities in Safeguarding Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage

In May 2002, **the first International Seminar on the Rehabilitation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage** was held in Kabul under the coordination of the Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan and UNESCO, in which 107 specialists in Afghan cultural heritage and representatives of donor countries and relevant institutions participated. During the three-day seminar, scientific discussions were held concerning the importance, problems, and difficulties in the conservation and rehabilitation of the Afghan tangible and intangible cultural heritage and definition of practical and achievable priority actions to achieve this end. This Seminar resulted in more than US\$ 7 million being pledged for priority projects. A ten-page document containing concrete recommendations for future action was adopted, in which the need to ensure effective cooperation was emphasized. From 16 to 18 June 2003, UNESCO organized, in cooperation with the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, **the First Plenary Session of the International Coordination Committee (ICC) for the Safeguarding of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage** in UNESCO HQs in Paris, which



Buddha of Bamiyan

brought some 40 experts in the presence of representatives of the Member States. The meeting resulted in concrete recommendations which concern key areas such as development of a long-term strategy, capacity-building, implementation of the World Heritage Convention and the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, national inventories and documentation, as well as rehabilitation of the National Museum in Kabul, safeguarding of the sites of Jam, Herat and Bamyan. Several donors pledged additional funding for cultural projects.

Rehabilitation of Kabul Museum

After the collapse of Taliban regime in December 2001, UNESCO sent a mission to identify and regroup the remains of various statues and objects in the Kabul Museum and to prepare a project for such restoration as winterization, a deep water well, an electric generator, new windows installation and so forth. In January 2003, the Greek Government initiated its restoration with a donation of some US\$ 750,000, and the US Government contributed US\$ 100,000. Together with NGOs, International experts and museums, UNESCO has been focusing on inventory of the collections, conservation and restoration of cultural and historical objects training and capacity-building activities for national experts.

Training Workshop on the implementation of the World Heritage Convention

Following the decision of the World Heritage Committee at its 26th session (June 2002 Budapest) and the approval of the international assistance, a training workshop was organized for the national and local authorities for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention in Kabul in Autumn 2003.

Construction of Madanjeet Singh Institute for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage

Considering urgent need for capacity-building in the field of cultural heritage preservation in Afghanistan through training activities for national specialists, the institute has been currently under construction, funded by UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Madanjeet Singh, and will be completed by the end of 2004.

Film on Illicit Traffic of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage Objects

Preserving historical and cultural property means a direct connection to inherit Afghan's history from the past. Donated by National Federation of UNESCO Associations in Japan, UNESCO is produced a short film on illicit looting and traffic of cultural artifacts, in order to raise awareness of

the Afghan people to the value and thereto connected responsibilities in safeguarding the country's archaeological heritage. This film will be shown on national television, as well as in towns and villages around the country through "Mobile Cinema" project conducted by AINA.

Posters and leaflet of looting and illicit traffic of Afghanistan's heritage

In view of countering looting and illicit traffic of Afghanistan's cultural property, Donated by the International Council of Museums (ICOMO), posters and leaflets have been produced in Dari, Pashto and English and distributed to the public.

Construction of the Playground / Cultural Center for Art & Music School

Funded by Felissimo Corporation of Japan, "Playground of my dream" was created to provide social services for the vulnerable young street working children and adolescents. The main objective of the project is to create a place where children can express themselves freely in safe, so that children could learn cultural, artistic and sports activities such as music, painting, playing sport and so forth.

Safeguarding of the Bamyan site

Under the implementation of the project donated by Japanese Funds-in-Trust, the following activities are foreseen; (1) the preservation of the mural paintings in the Buddhist caves (2) the preparation of Preliminary Master Plan of Bamyan to preserve the cultural landscape inscribed on the World Heritage List (3) the consolidation of the Small Buddha niche and its cliffs in the upper Eastern part and conservation of remaining pieces from the Large Buddha (4) the preparation of topographical maps and a digital 3 dimensional relief model of the Bamyan valley and its surroundings

An Expert Working Group on the Preservation of the Bamyan site in Munich, Germany

25 Afghan and international experts evaluated the present state of the site in Bamyan, compared different conservation methods and issued recommendations for the implementation of the different activities of the project. The 1st working group was organized in November 2002 and in 2 December 2003.

Training Workshop on the implementation of the World Heritage Convention

Following the decision of the World Heritage Committee at its 26th session (June 2002 Budapest) and the approval of the international assistance, a training workshop was organized in Herat for the national and local authorities for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention in Afghanistan in January 2004.

Emergency Consolidation and Restoration of Monuments in Herat and Jam

The project started in May 2003 and consisted in carrying out emergency consolidation, conservation and restoration for the endangered monuments, in particular the Minaret of Jam. Funded by Italian government, the 5th Minaret in Herat, which was in imminent risk of collapse, was stabilized temporarily by means of steel cables in July and August 2003.

Funded by German government, the Project “Retiling the Mausoleum of Gawhar Shad in Herat” has been implemented from February 2004 to July 2004. The objective of the project is to (1) train the staff members of department of Historical Monuments in Herat and local people to reproduce tiles necessary for the rehabilitation of the mausoleum, (2) promote and organize documentation, data collection on the monument, (3) retile and undertake the rehabilitation of the monument.



Mausoleum of Gawhar Shad

Preservation and rehabilitation of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage at the site of the “Minaret of Jam”

In order to prevent the accumulation of silt and rubble at the base of the Minaret in Jam by possible flooding, this project had been implemented. A guesthouse was also re-built for international experts and national authorities for their foreseen work.

Reinstallation and Reopening of the Islamic Museum at Rauza and Pre-Islamic Museum at Ghazni

Donated by Italian Government, the project will be executed to reactive the basic structures of Afghanistan's cultural heritage and to train personnel who are specialized in management and preservation, after reinstallation and reopening of the Islamic Museum at Rauza and Pre-Islamic Museum at Ghazni, which two are of the most important regional museums in Afghanistan.