CALL FOR A HALT TO THE DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES IN MALI

The World Archaeological Congress condemns the current religiously-motivated destruction of World Heritage sites in Timbuktu, Mali. Heritage sites in northern Mali have been placed on UNESCO’s List of World Heritage in Danger. Historic and spiritual sites in Gao also are under threat.

“Mali’s World Heritage sites are great symbols of the country and of significance to the world at large” said Professor Claire Smith, President of the World Archaeological Congress and Professor of Archaeology at Flinders University Australia. “Once lost, they can not be replaced.”

“The targeted attack on historic mausoleums and other heritage sites in Mali is distressing,” said Professor Smith. “This is not inadvertent. Cultural heritage is the target, not collateral damage, as in most conflicts.”

“This is comparable to the much-lamented destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. An attack on cultural heritage is an attack on another group’s source of pride, cultural strength and, ultimately, identity.’

“This is unusual because it is an attack on Muslim heritage by Muslim people, albeit from different religious factions. However, using cultural heritage as a weapon of war is self-defeating—the other side is likely to hit back by destroying your heritage sites. Thus begins a circuit of destruction.”

The former president of Mali, Alpha Korare, is an archaeologist and former Chairman of West African Archeologists' Association.

“We condemn the destruction that took place in Timbuktu. It is a crime against humanity,” said Professor Caleb Adebayo Folorunso, Vice-President of WAC and Professor of Archaeology at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

“The people of Mali are being deprived of their right to preserve their cultural heritage by an uninformed armed group. The international community should ensure that the perpetrators are brought to book quickly to avoid the spread of such destruction to other West African countries that may house similar religious extremists.”

“Sites in Africa are particularly vulnerable”, said Professor Folorunso. “The communications systems in Africa are not as developed as in other parts of the world, so it is more difficult to mobilise support from the international community”.

“This incident also highlights the need for low-income countries to have greater assistance with the protection of their World Heritage Sites”, said Professor Smith. “The responsibility for caring for such sites is that of the Member States, but countries with low-incomes often do not have adequate funding to manage and protect their sites.”
The World Archaeological Congress calls for the people involved in the conflict to desist from further damage to the sites. It calls for international support for local people who are mobilising to protect the sites. WAC welcomes the special fund that has just been created by UNESCO to assist Mali to conserve its cultural heritage.

**FURTHER INFORMATION:**
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**WAC BACKGROUND:**
The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization and is the only elected international body of practising archaeologists. WAC holds an international congress every four years to promote the exchange of the results of archaeological research; professional training and public education for disadvantaged nations, groups and communities; the empowerment and betterment of Indigenous groups and First Nations peoples; and the conservation of archaeological sites.

URL: http://www.worldarchaeologicalcongress.org/site/home.php