



Blue Shield Statement on Mali

23 May 2012

Following the alarming situation in Mali, the Blue Shield expresses its deep concern regarding the safeguarding of the country's invaluable cultural and historical heritage and deplores the suffering and loss of life this conflict has entailed.

Between 1988 and 2004, four sites in Mali were chosen to become part of the UNESCO World Heritage List, thus standing as international representatives of the nation's cultural and natural heritage: the world-renowned city of Timbuktu, home to the prestigious Koranic Sankore University and other madrasas; the Old Towns of Djenné, inhabited since 250 BC, a market centre and important link in the trans-Saharan gold trade, and a 15th and 16th century centre for the spread of Islam; the Tomb of Askia, with its world-renowned 17-metre pyramidal structure built in 1495 by Askia Mohamed, Emperor of Songhai, bearing witness to the power and riches of the empire that flourished during the 15th and 16th centuries; and the Cliff of Bandiagara, with its landscape combining cliffs, sandy plateaus and architectural achievements, living home to ancient regional traditions. Furthermore, six cultural practices and expressions found in Mali have been inscribed since 2008 in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage List, bearing witness to its rich living traditions.

The risks incurred by the people of Timbuktu and other cities in the country, and the precious manuscripts conserved here, are cause for great apprehension. The Blue Shield calls on all parties concerned by the protection of cultural heritage, specifically archives and documentation, to protect these fragile witnesses of Mali's, and the world's, history and evolution, both cultural and scientific.

The Republic of Mali has been a State Party to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its First Protocol since 1961, the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property since 1987, and the 1972 World Heritage Convention since 1977. These conventions, as well as customary international law, impose on all nations the obligation to protect their cultural heritage in times of armed conflict. The Blue Shield requests that all parties to the military strife in Mali fulfil these obligations and protect the country's outstanding cultural assets.

Mali's national legislation specifically addresses the issue of protection of cultural heritage in times of conflict. The 2001 Penal Code, states that "deliberate attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, arts, science or charitable activities, provided that such buildings are not used for military purposes," constitute a war crime in international armed conflicts. Furthermore, according to the 1979 Army Regulations, soldiers in combat must "spare buildings dedicated to religion, art, science or charitable purposes, and historic monuments, provided they are not being used for military purposes".

The Blue Shield's mission is "to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by armed conflict, natural and man-made disasters". For this reason, it places the expertise and network of its member organisations at the disposal of their colleagues working in Mali to support their work in protecting the country's heritage, and if necessary, providing assessment for subsequent recovery, restoration, and repair measures.

The Blue Shield

The Blue Shield is the protective emblem of the 1954 Hague Convention, which is the basic international treaty formulating rules to protect cultural heritage during armed conflicts. The Blue Shield network consists of organisations dealing with museums, archives, audiovisual supports, libraries, monuments and sites.

The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), founded in 1996, comprises representatives of the five non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in this field:

- The International Council on Archives (www.ica.org),
- The International Council of Museums (www.icom.museum),
- The International Council on Monuments and Sites (www.icomos.org)
- The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (www.ifla.org)
- The Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (www.ccaaa.org)

National Blue Shield Committees have been founded in a number of countries. The Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield (ANCBS), founded in December 2008, works to coordinate and strengthen international efforts to protect cultural property at risk of destruction in armed conflicts or natural disasters. The ANCBS has its headquarters in The Hague.

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