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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance: follow-up to and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by Institut International pour les Droits et le Développement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



Vandalism of cultural heritage of Azerbaijan in the liberated zones

Vandalism, or acts of deliberate destruction, has occurred throughout history. Irrespective of vandalism's social, political, or religious intent, the act itself constitutes damage upon the material landscape. It is an interaction between an individual and his or her direct material environment. The act derives from this environment and leaves a material trace. Thus, it often calls for the conservator's attention.

The preservation of the cultural diversity is one of the challenges faced by all countries because it is seen as a part of main amenities owned by human mankind. Azerbaijan is among rare countries where the cultural diversity is felt clearly and openly. Throughout the centuries, peoples that belong to various religions, races, languages and traditions, have co-existed in this country that paved the way for the formation of current cultural diversity. For the time being, Azerbaijan is populated by representatives of over 20 national minorities such as Talysh, Kurd, Lezghi, Tat, Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Inghiloy, Tatar, Avar, Ahyska Turk, Jewish, German, Greek and others. All of them enjoy the cultural societies. Representatives of three main religious confessions – Islamic, Christian and Judaic communities participate jointly at various public ceremonies and cultural events. Support and preservation of the cultural diversity are reflected in the State policy of Azerbaijan. At the same time, each Azerbaijani citizen has the right to use equally various cultural fields. The right of peoples populating the territory of the Azerbaijani State for religious freedom notwithstanding their religious background is being provided across the country. It should be noted that though 90% of the population is Muslim, there are the communities comprising over ten thousands of Ashkenazi and Mountain Jews that preserved their identity and enjoy their religious belief in 8 synagogues constructed with the direct public support.

Azerbaijan is also the Motherland of almost 450 thousand of Christians. This community includes Russian and Georgian orthodox Christians, Armenian Gregorian Church adepts, and a minor number of protestants that belong to the small German Lutheran community. Despite social problems emerged in the aftermath of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the Armenian Saint Gregory Church in downtown Baku is fully refurbished and under State protection. In 2010, Catholicos Karekin II, the head of the Armenian Gregorian Church and his Russian counterpart, Kirill I, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' have visited the Church and made the prayer.

Cultural vandalism and aggression

Hundreds of cultural institutions representing the cultural and religious heritage of Azerbaijan have been destroyed. According to data compiled by the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan, based on the statistics from the early 1990s, some 2,625 monuments were registered in the occupied territories, of which 706 were protected by the state. Hundreds of cultural institutions, including 927 libraries with 4.6 million books, 808 palaces of culture, clubs, and houses of culture, 85 music and art schools, 22 museums and museum branches with more than 100,000 exhibits, 4 art galleries, 4 theaters, 2 concert halls, 8 cultural and recreation parks have been destroyed and looted.

One of the world's oldest human settlements in the Khojavend district - the Azykh cave; the Shusha State Historical-Architectural Reserve and Govhar Agha Mosque in the same city, Aghdam's Bread Museum and Drama Theater, tens of mosques and cultural buildings in Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, Gubadli, and other districts have been targeted by Armenian vandalism, as well. Mosques have been transformed into barns for pigs and cattle during Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

Aghdam dubbed as "Hiroshima of the 21st Century" and "Hiroshima of the Caucasus" by international journalists, including prominent French photographer Reza Deghati and media outlets.

Azykh cave, the largest prehistoric human settlement that was home to primeval human beings about 350-400 thousand years ago, was subjected to numerous illegal excavations

since its occupation by Armenia in 1992. As a result of serial excavations in the cave, dozens of various valuable materials of scientific significance have been discovered and transferred illegally to the museums in Armenia and Western countries. They were introduced as the so-called "traces of ancestors of Armenians".

The most recent vivid proof of Armenia's massive cultural and environmental vandalism acts was seen in Azerbaijan's Kalbajar district in November 2020. Before the district's handover to Azerbaijan under the ceasefire agreement on November 25, Armenians resorted to unprecedented destruction and pillages in Kalbajar by setting houses on fire, chopping down the woods, knocking down the electric poles, and looting historical monuments, including the ancient Khudavang monastery complex. They have ransacked the ancient Albanian monastery complex (referred to as Dadivank by Armenians) to steal sacred items such as church bells and stones, artifacts, and portraits from the monastery. Armenians confessed that they destroyed everything they can "in order not to leave anything to Muslims".

"Smashed graves in a cemetery in Kalbajar region of Nagorno-Karabakh, of Azerbaijanis who were buried here before the 1993 Armenian occupation. Some graves were freshly smashed, seemingly by Armenians who left the area last week after 27 years of occupation," Amnesty International's Senior Crisis Advisor Donatella Rovera said in a Tweet. "During 27 years of occupation all was looted - not a door, nor a window, not a single roof tile was left in the houses of the Azerbaijanis who had to flee in 1993."

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry interpreted the documented vandalism acts by Armenia as a gross violation of international humanitarian law, including the UNESCO standard-setting instruments, such as the 1954 Hague Convention and its two protocols, as well as the 1970 Convention.

Conclusion

"Almost all historical, cultural and religious monuments were completely destroyed during the period of occupation. As of today, the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan has identified more than 400 monuments that have been destroyed in the liberated territories. The total number of the monuments in these territories is up to 3000. Cultural and religious property belonging to Azerbaijan has been looted, desecrated, altered and illegally exported to Armenia. Twenty-two museums and museum branches with over 100,000 artefacts in the liberated territories have been destroyed," Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement issued on the International Day for Monuments and Sites on April 18-2021.

"Artefacts and ancient manuscripts of 13th century Khudavang monastery situated in Kalbajar district, as well as precious artefacts found during illegal archaeological excavations near Shahbulag fortress of Aghdam district were illegally transported to Armenia. Besides that, illegal excavations have been conducted in Azykh cave in Azykh village of Khojavend region," the statement added.

Cultural vandalism by Armenia was common in the once occupied Azerbaijani territories and footage depicting mass destruction of the monuments during the years of occupation went viral after the liberation of the territories. Affected sites included mosques, memorials, museums, statues and more. The city of Aghdam, where the world's Bread Museum was located, as well as the city of Fuzuli, were completely razed to the ground, now resembling ghost towns.

Recommendation

Azerbaijan is an active member of the international bodies such as UNESCO, those are built and empowered to prevent further devastations caused by armed conflicts. There are the 1954 Hague Convention, the 1972 World Heritage Convention, and many other international agreements aimed at preventing the annihilation of human heritage. The destruction and desecration by Armenia of the cultural heritage in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan is the worst atrocity not only against the people of Azerbaijan but also against all humanity.

Putting an end to the brutal aggression and preventing further destruction, should be a concern of not only Azerbaijan but also the whole world.

IRDG Calls the relevant international organizations to investigate war crimes including the deliberate destruction, misappropriation, alteration of Azerbaijani cultural heritage, as well as illicit removal of cultural properties.

IRDG condemn all forms of cultural and religious heritage destruction in the liberated lands of Azerbaijan. We confirm that Looting and illicit trafficking of cultural objects can only deepen the wounds and createe injustice and hate feelings
