UN: Syria's ancient history faces new threats
29 August 2013, by Lori Hinnant

This is a combination of two citizen journalist images provided by Aleppo Media Center AMC which has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting, shows at left: the damaged famed 12th century Umayyad mosque without the minaret, background right corner, which was destroyed by the shelling, in the northern city of Aleppo, Syria, Wednesday April 24, 2013; and at right, an undated view of the mosque with is minaret still intact. The U.N. is trying to come up with a plan to protect Syria's cultural history, including hundreds of archaeological sites, ancient mosques and churches and artifacts that are being sold on the black market. (AP Photo/Aleppo Media Center, AMC)

Looted artifacts turning up on the black market, plundered archaeological sites and the collapse of the minaret of an 11th century mosque that was the ancient heart of Aleppo's walled Old City.

UNESCO, the U.N.'s cultural organization, is applying lessons learned the hard way from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, hoping to stem the havoc Syria's civil war has caused the country's cultural heritage.

But the destruction has already taken a steep toll—among landmarks destroyed is the 11th-century minaret of the Umayyad Mosque, which collapsed during fighting in April between government troops and rebels.

The mosque, a UNESCO world heritage site, was the centerpiece of Aleppo's Old City, along with the medieval marketplace that burned up in an inferno sparked by clashes in September 2012.

"The humanitarian crisis is catastrophic. So is the situation at the level of cultural heritage of Syria," said Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N. special envoy to Syria, who attended the gathering along with the Syrian government's director of antiquities.

"Few countries are as rich culturally, have had such a glorious past, are so important for what we are, all of us, for all the things that make, have made, human civilization," Brahimi said.

Irina Bokova, director general of UNESCO, said Thursday the U.N.'s cultural organization has learned from the pillaging and destruction that accompanied wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is trying to prioritize sites and encourage residents to protect them.

Maamoun Abdulkarim, Syria's antiquities chief, said the government stashed away the most valuable artifacts from museums around the country, mindful of the looting that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. He said Syrians, regardless of their politics, were becoming increasingly aware of the importance of protecting their heritage.

He said 10,000 archaeological sites and 40 museums needed protection from what he called "the painful events"—a common euphemism in Damascus for 2 ½ years of bloodshed.

"The local populations are playing a vital role. Everyone understands that we need to protect our heritage," he said.

But Bokova, acknowledging the destruction plainly
evident in satellite photos, said at this point appealing for people to safeguard the sites and scouring black markets for looted artifacts was the best hope for preserving Syria's history.

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