

The Hague, 8 July 2016

Mrs Irina Bokova
Director General
UNESCO

Re: Destructions of cultural heritage in South-East Turkey

Dear Madam Director General,

Europa Nostra, the European Federation of Cultural Heritage Organisations which maintains close and fruitful relations with the European Union and UNESCO, is deeply concerned about the armed conflicts in the South East of Turkey, which, in the past months, have not only cost the lives of hundreds of civilians in more than ten historical towns, but is also causing the destruction of cultural, social and economic urban life, as well as a large number of registered cultural heritage sites. Since the destruction of this multi-cultural historical heritage in Northern Mesopotamia with roots going back to millennia means, at the same time, the destruction of the heritage of humanity, we felt it incumbent upon us to bring this cultural and human tragedy to the attention of all concerned, at the moment when the World Heritage Committee is about to start its 40th annual session in Istanbul.

The most recent reports of the Venice Commission (European Commission for Democracy through Law), the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, FIDH (Federation Internationale des Droits de l'Homme), beyond the daily newspaper reports and those from local human rights groups, increase our serious concern regarding the situation in the region from day to day. Since September 2015, 60 different curfews were issued by local governors, some lasting for months without a break, with highly doubtful international or national legal justification. Armed clashes have caused irreparable damage to hundreds of historical mosques, churches and other, civilian architectural sites, as well as to thousands of dwellings, with hundreds of thousands of people made homeless.

As an important instance, in the walled city of Sur, the historical centre of Diyarbakir, declared a Historical Conservation Site since 2012 and buffer zone to the fortifications, a World Heritage Site by UNESCO since 2015, the great majority (more than 80%) of the buildings are to be expropriated according to a law passed at the end of March 2016. According to relying reports, large swathes have been bulldozed and turned into empty fields and barren boulevards in neighbourhoods boasting of hundreds of cultural heritage sites. More than twenty five thousand people have been forced to find refuge outside the city. Tens of cultural historical landmarks have been damaged or destroyed, including the St. Giragos Church, whose exemplary restoration received in 2015 a European Heritage Award given jointly by the European Union and Europa Nostra.



**The Voice of
Cultural Heritage
in Europe**

**La Voix du
patrimoine culturel
en Europe**

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We share the views expressed by the above-mentioned organisations that such measures are in violation of the international guidelines regarding the proportionality and effective control of the employed force or the protection of the lives and rights of the inhabitants in crisis situations, and therefore totally unacceptable. Entry into large parts of Sur are still prohibited, and the government has declared that totally new neighbourhoods are to be constructed, with no consultation either with the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality, the Site Management Directorate, or the more than 300 civil society organisations making up the Sur Conservation Platform.

In the light of the above alarming situation, EUROPA NOSTRA calls upon

- *the competent authorities in Turkey* to respect the human rights of the inhabitants, abide by the norms of rebuilding / recovery under conflict conditions, and to adopt a participatory approach, in close cooperation with the municipalities and Site Management Directory, professional organisations and the local inhabitants; and also
- *the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO* which will hold its ordinary meeting in Istanbul in the coming days, to put this very drastic situation with all of its different aspects on its agenda, and to offer specialised international professional assistance to this recovery process which should be conducted with effective local participation, respecting the preferences of the local inhabitants and strictly abiding by the professional standards and internationally recognized good practices of cultural heritage site management in conflict zones.

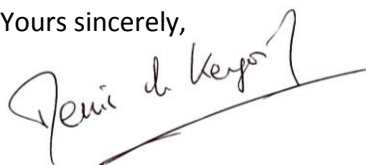
We kindly ask you to transmit this appeal to all members of the World Heritage Committee, including the host country of this year's annual meeting of this Committee.

Giving your very strong personal commitment to the safeguard of cultural heritage in times of conflict, we remain confident that Europa Nostra and the civil society organisations active in the field of heritage from all over Europe, including Turkey, can count on your personal attention to such serious destructions of invaluable cultural heritage, some of which concerns the World Heritage Site of Diyarbakir. We keep the hope that with the help of international organisations (both governmental and non-governmental), the Turkish authorities will put an end to the on-going deplorable practice of destructions of invaluable heritage in the South-East of Turkey.

Europa Nostra stays at the disposal of UNESCO to provide any further advice or assistance on this matter.

Wishing every success to the forthcoming annual session of the World Heritage Committee in Istanbul,

Yours sincerely,



Denis de Kergorlay
Executive President

Copy:

H.E. Ambassador Huseyin Avni Botsali, Permanent Representative of Turkey to UNESCO

