

Press release

Paris, 7 February, 2014



An ICOM / UNESCO / Blue Shield emergency mission to assess the damage to the National Library of Egypt and Islamic Museum in Cairo

An emergency mission led by representatives from the International Council of Museums (ICOM), UNESCO and the Blue Shield was carried out in Cairo from 30 January to 2 February, 2014, following a car bomb that caused extensive damage to the building housing both the Islamic Museum and the National Library of Egypt at Bab el-Khalq Place a week earlier.

The mission met with H.E. Professor Dr Mohammed Ibrahim, Minister of State for Antiquities, as well as the directors, curators and conservators of both institutions. They carried out an in-depth assessment of the damage to the building itself and to the collections.

The building at Bab al-Khalq Place was erected from 1889–1903 to house the Museum of Arab Antiquities – later known as the Museum of Islamic Art (since 1952) and the Islamic Museum (since 2007) – and the National Library of Egypt. The ground floor belonged to the Museum of Arab Antiquities and the second and third floors to the National Library of Egypt. Restoration of the historic building took place from 2000, the National Library reopened its museum and additional study rooms in 2007, and the Islamic Museum was reopened in 2011 with a new concept.

The blast at 6.02am on 24 January destroyed parts of the building including electricity installations, fire and water networks and air condition systems. While “the architectural substance of the building is safe”, according to architect Riccardo Giordano, who participated in the mission, there has been huge damage to the collections held by both the National Library of Egypt and the Islamic Museum. The conservators of both institutions acted immediately and saved many of the exhibited objects from further damage and destruction.

Dr Regine Schulz, member of ICOM’s Executive Council and Director/CEO of the Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim (Germany), made together with Christian Manhart (UNESCO), the architect Riccardo Giordano and Dr Shadia Mahmoud (Ministry of Antiquities, Egypt) a first round of assessment of the damage following days of inspection and collective study with the teams of the two institutions. The whole museography of the Museum of the National Library and of the Islamic Museum was destroyed. Most of the manuscripts and scrolls were protected by the bullet-proof showcases. Some 326 objects were exhibited in the Museum of the National Library including seven rare manuscripts and three papyri which suffered water damage, two in cases severe. “The situation in the Islamic Museum is even worse.”, said Dr Schulz, “Because several of the large wood, bronze and glass objects were displayed without glass protection, the damage and destruction are very serious”. In January 2014 a total of 1,471 objects were on display. Of these, 164 were completely destroyed, badly damaged or missing until now, including 61

ceramics (vessels and tiles), 54 glass objects, 20 metal works, 18 wood works, five stone objects, five pieces of jewellery and one golden coin.

Additional damage was mainly caused by running water unleashed by the fire fighting system which could not be stopped immediately and by the scattered glass resulting from broken windows and showcases. All damaged objects must be cleaned very carefully, and glass fragments and other remains from the blast removed.

UNESCO had already set aside emergency funds of 100,000 US Dollars on the same day the blast took place stating that “measures for the rehabilitation of these two institutions and their collections will shortly be submitted by UNESCO to potential donors in Egypt and abroad.” The assessment mission report will help to raise funds to repair the damages in the two Egyptian institutions.

Since the 2011 uprising, ICOM has been following the events in Egypt closely. In 2011, ICOM published an *Emergency Red List of Egyptian Cultural Objects at Risk* as a tool to disseminate information and raise public awareness of the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural objects. ICOM’s Disaster Relief Task Force also reported on the burnt down *Institut d’Egypte* in December 2011.

About the International Council of Museums (ICOM)

The International Council of Museums (ICOM), created in 1946, is the world organisation of museums and museum professionals. ICOM is committed to promoting and protecting natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. With more than 30,000 members in 136 countries, the ICOM network is made up of museum professionals from a wide range of museum- and heritage-related disciplines.

ICOM’s commitment to culture and knowledge promotion is reinforced by its 31 International Committees, which are dedicated to a wide range of museum specialities and conduct advanced research in their respective fields for the benefit of the museum community. The organisation’s International and National Committees hold annual conferences and symposiums worldwide that revolve around pre-defined themes with a view to fostering exchange among museum professionals of all nationalities. In addition, ICOM organises International Museum Day each year, a worldwide event held around 18 May, to increase public awareness of the role of museums in developing society.

ICOM promotes standards of excellence in the museum field, in particular through its *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, a standard-setting tool for museums, which includes basic principles for museum governance, the acquisition and disposal of collections, and rules for professional conduct.

In order to carry out its international public service missions, ICOM partners with entities such as the World Intellectual Property Organization, INTERPOL and the World Customs Organisation, and maintains its long-standing collaboration with UNESCO. These missions include fighting illicit traffic in cultural goods and promoting risk management and emergency preparedness to protect world cultural heritage in the event of natural or man-made disasters.

The UNESCO-ICOM Museum Information Centre, created in 1946, gathers the most comprehensive collection of ICOM publications including *ICOM News*, *ICOM Red Lists*, publications by ICOM’s Committees and conference proceedings.

Website: <http://icom.museum>

For any matter related to the global museum community:

ICOM General Secretariat, icom.presse@icom.museum, +33 1 47 34 35 30