



ქვეყნური გაეროს განყოფილება და სსპა
საერთაშორისო ორგანიზაციებთან
საქართველოს მუდმივი წარმომადგენლობა

MISSION PERMANENTE DE LA GÉORGIE
AUPRÈS DE L'OFFICE DES NATIONS
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№ 49/21860
10/06/2016

Dear Ms. Bennoune,

Allow to me to use this opportunity and commend you for tireless efforts aimed at protection of cultural rights, which, sadly, are frequently violated across the globe. My delegation was inspired and impressed by your presentation during the 31st Session of the Human Rights Council, where you have pinpointed key elements related to this very problem.

In this regard, please find attached the information on *The State of Georgian Cultural Heritage in the occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia* and the latest edition of the book entitled *Historical-Cultural Heritage in Abkhazia*. I sincerely hope that presented materials will contribute to the preparation of your next report.

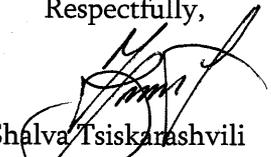
Please, accept, Dear Ms. Bennoune, the assurances of my highest consideration. I am at your disposal, should you require further information on this matter.

OHCHR REGISTRY

14 JUN 2016

Recipients: S.P.B.
..... M. Bidauli (Encl.)
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.....

Respectfully,


Shalva Tsiskarashvili
Permanent Representative

Ms. Karima Bennoune
Special Rapporteur in the
Field of cultural rights



№ 49/21797

The Permanent Mission of Georgia to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva presents its compliments to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and kindly requests to transfer the enclosed letter of the Permanent Representative of Georgia to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, Mr. Shalva Tsiskarashvili and the book to the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Ms. Karima Bennoune.

The Permanent Mission of Georgia to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurances of its highest consideration.

Office of the High Commissioner
For Human Rights
Geneva



9 June 2016, Geneva

The State of Georgian Cultural Heritage in the occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia (March 2016)

The Russian aggression of 2008 and the subsequent occupation of Georgian regions (Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia) have endangered historic monuments located therein. . As a continuation of the policy of ethnic cleansing, Georgian cultural heritage located in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions became a subject for stylistic falsifications aiming to obliterate all cultural associations with Georgian history and cultural identity. Ancient works of arts are intentionally being destroyed and Georgian monasteries of many centuries old are being replaced with temples of non-Georgian appearance. It should be noted that the state of the monuments of Georgian cultural, historical and religious heritage located in the occupied regions is getting worse every day. Some monuments are in urgent need of rehabilitation.

Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia

The Russian aggression of August 2008 caused an extensive damage to monuments located in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Under the guise of safeguarding the cultural monuments, we will ultimately witness a dramatic and deliberate destruction of Georgian cultural heritage on the occupied territory. The aforesaid is a merciless continuation of the policy of ethnic cleansing of Georgians aimed at eradicating the signs of Georgian presence on the occupied territories.

During the August 2008 War the historical monuments in the Georgian villages of Sveri, Kekhvi, Kurta, Achabeti, Tamarasheni, Kemerti, Dzartsemi, Kheiti, Disevi, Eredvi, Avnevi and Nuli were damaged or destroyed. Among these monuments are: Ivane Machabeli's House – Museum; Kheiti's Archangels Church; Kemerta's Archangels Church; Monastery of Tiri; Gomarta's St. George's Church; Achabeti fortress; Tskhinvali Cathedral; Tsunari's Church; Zguder's St. George's Church. Armazi's St. George's Church. Sveri's St. Georges Church; Dzartsemi Church; Palace of Giorgi Machabeli (in Kurta) The Fence of St. George's Church (in Eredvi).

Ikorta Church of the Archangel is an outstanding sample of 12th-century Georgian architecture. For ages it has been one of the significant cultural and spiritual centers of Georgia. It occupies a special place in the history of Georgian Christian architecture, being one of the earliest examples of the XII-XIII centuries Georgian domed churches. The building combines peculiarities of the XI century decoration system with artistic approaches characteristic of the new stage of development (XII-XIII centuries). The artistic significance of the church is increased by the superb ornamentation of its exterior walls and the contemporary murals preserved in the interior. Due to its diversity and high artistic mastery, the Ikorta ornamental decoration is justly considered one of the great achievements of mediaeval Georgian sculpture. The 1991 earthquake in Georgia greatly damaged the church: the walls were deformed, perforating cracks have emerged, facing masonry has fallen off and is weakened in many places; vaults of the southern and western cross-arms were severely damaged; the structural stability of the church interior had decreased to a great extent; a large portion of the dome (approximately one-quarter) had collapsed in its western part, damaging roofs and roofing constructions of the western and southern cross-arms. In 1999 the site was listed on the '100 Most Endangered Sites' list. Nevertheless, nothing has been done in order to restore this remarkable exhibit of medieval Georgian sculpture and the monument is still under the threat of demolition.

Tiri Monastery (XIII – XVII) is situated in 8 kilometers from Tskhinvali. It is considered as one of the landmark statues of Georgian culture, with unique architecture, ornaments and wall paintings, lapidary inscriptions. Started from XIII and until the XVII century Georgian kings were constantly "updating" it. After 2008 Russian aggression, for

a short period Russian clerics performed service in the church. Currently this church is abandoned. The roof and walls are damaged with water. The Monastery requires an immediate intervention. The painting of the XIV century is particularly affected because of the humidity. The roof and walls must be repaired as well

Unprofessional restoration works terribly reflected on **Gomarta's St. George church** (XVI). This temple was one of the main places of worship for the population of Prone and Liakhvi Gorges. The church was covered with XVI century paintings. First of all this temple was damaged by the natural conditions – dampness affected painting of the walls and vaults. The "restoration" works that were held last year not only damaged, but also changed the façade of the church. The western apses – the walls and the roof – were plastered with cement. Such actions has broken and significantly distorted the overall proportions of the church. Wrongly organized scaffoldings in the Church interior completely damaged the paintings.

The Georgian trace is nearly erased from **Achabeti Fortress** (XVI) located in Liakhvi Gorge as a result of so called "rehabilitation works" launched by the occupational regime one year ago.

The altar of **Tsunari's (Khetagurovi) Virgin Church** (XIV) was altered with the Russian style painting. The ancient stone iconostasis with relief depiction was re-painted in pink - white colors, typical for Russian churches.

The same fate was shared by the **Tskhinvali's Zguderi St. George's Church** (XVII). Its interior was also covered with the Russian style painting.

Also **Tskhinvali's St. George's Church** (late middle ages) was fully grinded and re-painted in white and light green colors. Churchmen arbitrarily changed its name and now they call it St. Constantine and Helena's Cathedral.

During the war in August 2008 **St. George wooden Church** (XIX) in Sveri was burned.

The dome of **Archangel Church**, built in 1999, was damaged in Kemerti.

The **House - museum of Ivane Machabeli** (XVIII - XIX) (the writer and translator of Shakespeare) in the village of Tamarasheni and the Palace of Giorgi Machabeli in Kurta were completely burnt down. The both buildings had the status of cultural heritage monuments.

Local clergy presents a distorted version of history to visitors of the **Dormition Cathedral in Tskhinvali**, built in 1718, by narrating that the Cathedral has nothing in common with Georgian culture and represents a sample of Byzantine culture. They built the small apses on the Southern part of the Cathedral. This apses blurred out the Georgian church painting of 1718. The interior is covered with the Russian style of painting. Rooms are built around the church - church store, bell tower, fence etc.

The **Red Church** located in the Tskhinvali suburbs and Kulbiti's **Virgin Mary Church** are heavily damaged and require restoration.

In 2012 a virtual map of cultural monuments was created by the occupation regime, in which **42 entries** were marked. Apart from that, the so called "Parliament of South Ossetia" adopted three "laws" on preservation of cultural heritage of South Ossetia: the "Law on Import and Export of Units of Cultural Value"; the "Law on Cultural Heritage Units"; the "Law on Works of Art". This illegal exercise of establishing a pseudo normative-legal base is an attempt by the regimes in control to alter and erase the history and cultural heritage of Georgian monuments

Monuments of Akhalgori

Georgian clerics and Tskhinvali Diocese bishops are trying to protect the monuments from destruction. However, because of the lack of funds they can just cover the churches by tents or clean the adjacent territory from shrubberies. The main problems of Akhalgori's historical sites are illegal Russian military bases that are deployed in the villages. Intense military exercises, permanently conducted by the occupational Russian troops, damage

churches and castles, the chronology of which starts from the VI century. For example, because of the systematic military exercises of the occupying forces illegally stationed in the village of Kanchaeti and the powerful explosions, extremely important cultural monuments were damaged: In Kanchaeti – the Virgin Monastery complex (IX - XVIII), the Holy Archangels and St. George churches, tower (the late Middle Ages). In Tsirkoli – the Castle (IX), the Virgin Church (IX), St. George Church, St. George's Monastery and tower (the late Middle Ages), St. Marine Church (XIX).

Under the same risk are the sites near the illegal Russian military base of Dzartsemi: two churches of St. George (X and XIV). In Kemerti – St. George's Church (VIII) and there towers. In Kheiti – the Monastery of St. Saba (X), Virgin Church, Dzelitskhoveli Church (XIII – XIV), the Church of the Saviour (XVII_XVIII). The museum of Ksani Gorge that is located in this district (4594 exhibits) is in constant danger.

Armazi St. George's Church (864) is considered as one of the most important monuments of Georgian architecture. The uniqueness of this monument is in its architectural form – it is domed and hall church simultaneously. In 2014 it was planned to make some changes in the interior – in particular, they were going to strengthen the supporting columns of the dome. They also wanted to clean the surrounded area. They already strengthened the columns and arches supporting the iconostasis in the North-West part. On the west part of the church totally inappropriate for this environment three-part wide staircase was built. This staircase connects the church with the new Tskhinvali-Akhalgori road.

The roof of **Eristavi's Residence** (XVII – XIX) in Akhalgori also needs the renovation. Now it has the status of the Museum-Reserve. Together with the building the protected exhibits are also under the threat. These are the early Christian archaeological materials, fragments of medieval iconostasis and relief, dozens of figures decorated with color stones, which were used to cover the churches, icons and interesting Georgian historical inscriptions of XVII-XX centuries.

Unfortunately, because of the lack of the access, it is impossible for the Government or other stakeholders to monitor the condition of cultural heritage in occupied Tskhinvali region. We possess only a small part of information about above mentioned monuments.

Abkhazia

The condition of historical and religious monuments in occupied Abkhazia region worsens every day. The international mission had an opportunity to monitor the state of the cultural heritage in Abkhazia, Georgia in 1997, four years after the end of the externally generated conflict.

At that time, UNESCO managed to send to the Abkhazia region the Cultural Heritage Assessment Mission. Its security was provided by UNOMIG. The members of this mission visited 17 monuments and prepared short reports about each of them. This was the only case where international experts were given the chance to carry on the monitoring of the monuments located in the Abkhazian region.

As an occupying power, which exercise a control over the region, Russia is obligated, under the International law, to take all appropriate measures to protect a cultural heritage on the ground. By not doing so, Russia violates the Convention on the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Event of Armed Conflict, Hague, 1954.

On 16, October, 2010, the so-called Ministry of Culture of the "Republic of Abkhazia" and the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation signed the agreement in the field of preservation, examination, popularization and state protection of historical and cultural monuments. But instead of "restoration" they started the deliberately distorting the Georgian cultural heritage. In order to remove Georgian traces they committed acts of vandalism in such remarkable samples of Georgian architecture as St. George's Ilori Church, Beslakhuba Church (V), Kamani Monastery (XI), Drandi Church (VI-VII), Likhni (X-XI), Mokvi monastery (X). Also Georgian inscriptions (in "asomtavruli") on Tamar Bridze (XII-XIII) were damaged.

According to the 2011 August information after the "restoration works" in Bedia Monastery the walls of the monument were repainted, historical murals and fresco icon of Bagrat III was damaged. In 2011 ICOM delegation visited Abkhazia with restorers and specialists of the museum area. Delegation members elaborated practical recommendations concerning immediate measures

According to ICOM, museums, monuments and sites suffered from armed conflicts and natural disasters and it's necessary to held complex works for the conservation of the cultural monuments. Fundamental problems, as ICOM said, is the arbitrary actions of temples "rulers", because sometimes they distort the origin image of the monuments. Experts underlined that because of the importance of these monuments the restoration works should be carried out by licensed and qualified professional restorers.

"Restoration" works in Abkhazia

Representatives of the occupying regime presented a list of 10 monuments in urgent need of restoration. Among them are: Tsandripshi, Drandy, Mokvi, Bedia and Lashkindari temples, Bichvinta Cathedral, architectural compounds of Otkhara and Tsabelda, Sokhumi Fortress. It must be mentioned that they plan to carry out "restoration" works without involvement of Georgian specialists.

One of the most precious monuments of Georgian cultural heritage, the **11th century Ilori St. George Church** (XI), in the Ochamchiri District, has completely lost its authenticity after the so-called rehabilitation works carried out in 2010. Such works have resulted in obliteration of all characteristic features of the traditional Georgian architecture reshaping it after the Russian architectural model. This has been done by adding a so called "onion shaped" dome to the building, a typical Russian architectural detail. The front walls, including the eastern side of the church, which featured five Georgian lapidary inscriptions, have been painted in white, lined with red color arches, as well as other architectural profiles, alien to Georgian architecture.

Two frescoes were preserved during the painting on the eastern facade of the Ilori - St. George ancient "image" and inscriptions in the Georgian language. Also conditioning systems were added to the façade. Because of these reasons we can see the changes of the authentic features of the monument, its interior and exterior are getting worse and step by step it loses the particularity that distinguishes it from other sites of Georgian architecture.

Bedia Episcopal Cathedral (the end of X century) is located in the village of Agubedia, 25 km to the northeast from city Ochamchiri. The ruins of the bell-tower and the Episcopal palace are still preserved near the cathedral. King of Georgians and Abkhazians Bagrat III (978-1014) built Bedia Cathedral and he is buried here. The dome of the church is ruined. In the interior one can still find the fragments of mural painting dated X-XI, XIII-XIV and XVI-XVII centuries. The murals and frescos of the cathedral have preserved Georgian *Asomtavruli* inscriptions. In 2007-2009, the fresco icons of Bagrat III and Marekh Dadiani and large *Asomtavruli* inscription depicted between them were distorted by the occupation regime.

Episcopal House of Bedia (XV) is considered as very important part of the complex. In medieval centuries it was one of the most important ecclesiastical, cultural and educational center. Its northern side needs urgent renovation. The temple is not provided with appropriate protection.

There is also serious problem with the wall's drainage canal. Besides, the conservation of two small churches walls had not been carried out. As for the inscriptions (XIV century), the protective works on this issue was held in 2003. But this is not enough. It is necessary to continue the reinforcement of the wall paintings and get rid of the graffiti and scratches, which is left by tourists.

Mokvi Cathedral is located in the Ochamchire district. It consists of five naves, built in the third quarter of the X century, during the reign of King Leon III (957-967). According to a non-extant inscription (found by Patriarch Dositheos II of Jerusalem who visited Mokvi in 1659) the church was painted during the reign of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos. Later, during the reign of David the Builder (1089-1125), the interior walls were decorated with frescoes which remained intact until the end of the 18th century. In the first half of the 19th century, however, the cathedral

fell into disrepair. It was not until Prince Mikhail Shervashidze, who was born in Mokvi, began restoration in the 1840s that it functioned once again as a church. In the 80s of XX century restoration work was carried out in the church interior. After these works the XIV-XV wall paintings appeared with the Georgian *Asomtavruli* inscriptions.

The church underwent some renovation work. Among them is the restoration of 1968. Generally the facade is in good condition, only in some places the color has changed (dark gray), indicating a problem with the pipes.

The painting is dating from the XII century. At the bottom of the walls and columns the green algae had risen. The iconostasis was made in the late XIX - XX century. All the icons are in extremely poor condition - their restoration has never conducted. The exterior needs the drainage system. As for inside part, it is necessary to get rid of algae and restore the icons.

Likhni Cross-Domed Temple of Dormition of the Virgin was built at the turn of the X-XI centuries. It's located in the very center of the village of Likhni (Gudauta region). It was not reconstructed throughout its thousand-year history and preserved its original appearance. Its appearance is strict and simple: the outside walls are lined with large smooth slabs of reddish limestone. It also has the arches from three sides and octagonal drum with a low dome. One can also find here the fragments of unique medieval frescoes belonging to the different ages. The oldest from them are dated back to the X-XI centuries.

In 2011 all parts of the roof were covered with special conservation coating (which protects the interior from the leakage). The large fragments of the facade changed their color to dark gray. This indicates that the temple has some problems with the functioning of drainage pipes.

The interior also has the traces of the leak. The same problem is on the arches. One can also find cracks in the walls and arch constructions. Because of the leaks on the roof it's necessary to perform vertical planning works. Monument must be provided with the reliable drainage system.

Main frescoes of Likhni belong to the 14th century (the image of the Virgin and Child, the Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. John the Baptist etc.). The restoration work was carried out in 1970-1980's. However, due to the leakages fragments of inscriptions are in poor condition.

On the top of Mount Iberia lies in ruins **Anakopia fortress** and the ancient temple. Constructed in the II-IV centuries Anakopia fortress has another date of birth – the VII-VIII centuries when the fortress was thoroughly reinforced. Only walls fragments, the entrance gate and towers have partially survived. The fortifications were made from smooth square blocks. Their thickness reached 1.1 m and its present height is 4-5 m. In the northeast part of the fortress there are still some stone stairs which were used for climbing the walls. The ruins of two watchtowers can be seen inside the citadel. One used to stand near the gate. On its second floor small loopholes are visible. The second was of major significance the so-called Roman tower of quadrangular shape with loopholes. In the center of Anakopia citadel on the very precipice brink there was Anakopia Temple. This interesting monument of architecture was built in the VI-VII centuries. On August 16, 2014 archaeological excavations in Anakopia Fortress were conducted by heavy equipment and beginner specialists. No preliminary studies were conducted and, according to the Georgia's Cultural Heritage and Monuments Protection National Agency, such kind of construction is illegal and dangerous.

Dranda Cathedral (VIII) is located in the village of Dranda, Gulripshi region. It is built of brick and rubble. The cathedral was restored in the 70-ies of XX century (V. Tsintsadze). In 2011 the baptismal piscine of reinforced-concreted was built in the southern part of narthex of the church, that damaged the fragment of old piscine located under it. This monument is included in the list of „rehabilitation“ monuments of 2013 by the Sokhumi occupation regime. There has been some restoration on the exterior walls of the structure and roof, covering with stucco much of the original brick architecture that was once visible. Small portions may still be seen in what was intentionally left untouched. From 2011 “specialists” are conducting unauthorized “works” in Dranda temple and its surrounding areas. They are making important constructive changes in the inner side of the temple. Also they dug 400 m2 of

outside territory without permission of archaeologists. Besides, an illegal buildings were built on the old basis of the temple. The restoration is carried out with modern building materials and by organization without any experience in this field.

Note: *The journalistic investigation, which was printed in the newspaper "Christian Abkhazia" in September, 2014 has revealed some facts of religious buildings arbitrary construction in the eastern part of the Gali district, in Dranda Cathedral.*

Also in order to remove Georgian traces acts of vandalism took place in a prominent Georgian architecture monuments, such as Beslakhuba church (V) and Kamani Monastery (XI). We should also emphasize the architectural and archaeological value of village Tsarcheti monuments. Among them are five-room church "Phichvish okhvame" and Ethnographic Museum. In 2005 it has been damaged due to heavy snow and in order to avoid its complete destruction it became necessary to dismantle the Museum.

Lashkendar Temple (X-XI centuries) is located 5-6 km from city Tkvarcheli, on Lashkendar Mountain. The temple is extremely ruined and covered with vegetation. An icon of cross is depicted above the door, as well as the relief with lion icons is preserved. This monument is included in the list of „rehabilitation“monuments of 2013 by the Sokhumi occupation regime.

Bzipi Architectural Complex – the ruins of fortress and cathedral (IX-X centuries) is located in the village of Bzipi, Gagra region. The fortress consists of two parts. The church – domed construction of the "cross-in-square" type, with three projecting apses - is located in the upper part of the fortress. The remains of the older church are visible to the east of the cathedral.

Three-Church Basilica of Gagra (VI century) is built of roughly hewn squared stone blocks of white color.

Bichvinta Episcopal Cathedral (X century) is the cross-domed construction, built of brick and stone formations; the interior has preserved the fragments of mural painting. An aqueduct is preserved near the church and its restoration is planned this year. Bichvinta ancient settlement (Big Pitiunt) is located nearby the church, which is mentioned in the Greek Romanian sources of Antique Era. The archeologist found the ruins of Episcopal cathedral of IV-V centuries on the territory of the ancient settlement.

Besleti Bridge (X-XII centuries) - a single-arch construction is located over the small river, 5 km to the northeast from Sokhumi. It is built of big flat stones. The bridge bears big Asomtavruli inscription on the side facet of the bridge arch.

Komani Church (initial construction of XI century) is located near the village of Shroma, Sokhumi region and is the hall-type construction, with the trace of multiple restorations.

Svimon Kananeli Domed Temple (IX-X centuries) is located on Iveria Mountain of New Atoni. According to our information, the "restoration" works have been performing here. Archeological artifacts were found in the church interior. The church has preserved the fragments of mural painting of XII century. Old Anakopia fortress is preserved here as well.

Bagrati Fortress of Sokhumi is located in the southwestern part of the city, on the left bank of the Besleti River. This monument is included in the list of rehabilitation monuments of 2013 by the Sokhumi occupation regime.

Ailaga-Abiku Church (VIII-IX centuries) is located 10 km from city Gudauta, on the sea coastal area.

Tsandripsh three-nave Basilica (VI century) is located in the village of Gantiadi, Gagra region, on the sea coastal area. The church with ruined vault is built of limestones and bricks. This monument is included in the list of „rehabilitation“monuments of 2013 by the Sokhumi occupation regime.

Miusera Cathedral (VIII-IX centuries) is located in the village of Miusera, Gudauta region. Nowadays the cathedral is stripped and its vault is collapsed. It belongs to so called three-church basilica type.

Tsebelda Fortress (Gulripshi region, River Kodori Gorge), the same as Tsibelium in the Greek sources. According to Prokopi Kesarieli (VI century), it was a well-strengthened fortress, which played an important role in the Lazika Kingdom. The remains of the towers, church buildings and other constructions are preserved in the ruins. This monument is included in the list of „rehabilitation“ monuments of 2013 by the Sokhumi occupation regime.

Otkhara Complex is the cave monastery built to the mountain near Gudauta. This monument is included in the list of „rehabilitation“ monuments of 2013 by the Sokhumi occupation regime.

Kelasuri Architectural Complex (XI-XIV centuries) is located near the village of Kelasuri, Sokhumi region. Only the ruins of several churches are preserved on the territory bounded with fence.

Three-Church Basilica of Ambara (VII-VIII centuries) is located in the village of Ambara (15 km from Gudauta). The church has two-storied narthex and catheads. The ruins of residential houses and fences were discovered nearby the church.

Illegal excavations

Pillaging of cultural artifacts in occupied Abkhazia region by “shadow archeologists” constitutes one of the main problems of the region. Items found during illegal archeological excavations in Abkhazia are sold mainly in Russia. Even State Hermitage Museum has purchased some items of cultural importance found in occupied Abkhazia region. Group of Russian “shadow/black archeologists” annually visit Abkhazia and conduct illegal excavations. “Shadow/black archeologists” are familiar with the location of historic sites in the region, they pay bribes in exchange for permission to conduct illegal excavations; probably they are even protected by the representatives of local law enforcement agencies. That is the reason why no culprits have been identified and arrested so far. It should be noted that the scale of the “shadow/black archeology” in Abkhazia has become increasingly alarming. With these acts Russia is violating the international law, including the obligations assumed under the International Humanitarian Law, particularly, under *the Convention on the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Event of Armed Conflict, Hague, 1954*, which condemns the state parties for damaging and destroying historic and cultural heritage while in case of occupation obliges State Parties to the Convention to take all appropriate measures to conduct their activities in such a manner as to protect cultural heritage.