

Mali Islamists vow to destroy 'every mausoleum' in Timbuktu
By: Tom A. Peter, The Christian Science Monitor
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Islamists in northern Mali have drawn both domestic and international condemnation after they destroyed seven historic tombs and the door to an ancient mosque in Timbuktu over the weekend. The shrines to the saints are important to local Sufi Muslims, but Mali's Islamists say that such religious landmarks constitute idolatry.

Mali has been unstable since a military coup sparked fighting in March. Much of the country is still in grave turmoil, with Islamist group Ansar Dine now in control of the north. In the face of such an uncertain future, the United Nations' cultural agency just last week listed Timbuktu as an endangered world heritage site.

Now the BBC reports that Sanda Ould Boumama, Ansar Dine's spokesman, says his group will "destroy every mausoleum in the city – all of them, without exception."

The group is already facing harsh international criticism for the attack, which is likely to result in alienation on the global stage, as happened to the Taliban in March 2001 when they blew up 6th century Buddha statues in Afghanistan's Bamiyan province.

The International Criminal Court has already issued a statement calling the destruction of Timbuktu's religious landmarks a potential "war crime," reports Agence France-Presse.

"My message to those involved in these criminal acts is clear: stop the destruction of the religious buildings now," said Fatou Bensouda, an ICC prosecutor, according to AFP. "This is a war crime which my office has authority to fully investigate."

Timbuktu's monuments, particularly the Koranic Sankore University, are symbols to many in Mali of the Timbuktu's golden age in the 15th and 16th century, writes UNESCO, the UN's cultural body. At the time, Timbuktu was a center for scholarship, spirituality, and Islamic theology in Africa.

The destruction of the landmarks and the threat to destroy more has caused considerable outrage among Malians.

"I think this kind of madness of Ansar Dine is horrible. All the place for history in Timbuktu, this is not Sharia. Even if you see what they did, the destruction in Timbuktu, maybe the mosque, the big mosque, the cemetery for person who died, they said is no good – who tell them that? Who tell them it is not in the Koran? We never see that," said Mahamadou Hima Dit Nourou in an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Mr. Nourou is among the tens of thousands Malian refugees who fled to neighboring Niger.

Government officials in Mali have called on the international community to take measured steps and make a concerted effort to stop Ansar Dine from destroying any more cultural landmarks. Yesterday Malian officials made an emotional appeal to the UN for help, at one point declaring, "God help Mali."

"Mali exhorts the UN to take concrete steps to stop these crimes against the cultural heritage of my people," said Fadima Diallo, Mali's Minister of Culture and Tourism, according to the Telegraph. "I am pleading for the international community's solidarity."

Sufi shrines are a popular target of Islamist hardliners, with Egypt and Libya also seeing the destruction of Sufi shrines this year, reports Reuters. Ansar Dine is made of Salafist Muslim fighters, many of whom come from other countries such as Nigeria and Algeria. The Malian group is an ally of the Al Qaeda splinter group, MUJWA, and now controls about two-thirds of the northern Mali.