UK National Commission for UNESCO  Suite 98

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**Urgent action needed to preserve endangered Hasankeyf and the Iraqi marshes**

To:

Helen Maclagan – Culture Expert

Professor Martin Price – Environmental Scientist

Professor Robin Coningham – Archaeologist

We are writing to you today to draw your attention to the call for Hasankeyf and the Iraqi marshes to become a World Heritage Site.

The 12,000 year old town of Hasankeyf sits on the mighty Tigris river in north Kurdistan, in ancient Mesopotamia, which lies in modern-day south-eastern Turkey. One of the oldest civilisations in the world, Hasankeyf will disappear forever when the Ilisu dam is completed. The dam will flood or partially flood 199 villages and will displace up to 78,000 people. The dam is currently 90% complete.

Hasankeyf fulfills nine out of the ten criteria of the specifications to be designated a World Heritage Site, and it was one of the most important settlements in Upper Mesopotamia for a long time. Archaeological investigations are still ongoing in Hasankeyf, and recent excavations uncovered remnants of the Hurri and Mitani civilisations. Hasankeyf is full of monuments and ancient buildings, and until recently humans still lived in many of its 5,000 caves.

Hasankeyf castle was constructed by Constantine, and the area around the castle contains palaces and mosques. The Great Palace was constructed during the Roman Empire, and excavations are still continuing. The Great Mosque was build by the Ayyubids in 1325 AD and is the oldest structure of the Islamic period. The 40 metre-high minaret of the El Rizk Mosque is a wonder of engineering, and is elegantly adorned with Islamic calligraphy and engravings. These are just a few of Hasankeyf's remarkable wonders which are threatened by the Ilisu dam.

The Iraqi marshes of Southern Mesoptamia are also under grave threat. Thousands of years of culture will be affected. The area is already subject to severe droughts, and the state of the marshes is deteriorating with each day that goes by. The Ilisu dam, and its sister dam, the Cizre dam, will create a desert and lead to the forced migration of local people from their homeland.

A UN resolution was approved in May 2015 in order to “*Save Cultural Heritage in Iraq*”. This resolution had strong support from United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Mr Jan Eliasson. We believe that the Iraqi marshes should not be ignored in this vital resolution. During this meeting of the UN General Assembly, the Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, Ms Maria Böhmer, stated that *“Iraq is a cradle of our common civilization… Its heritage has been entrusted to the care of all of mankind.”*

On September 8th 2015 the UNESCO Director-General participated in an International Conference on the Protection of Victims and Ethnic and Religious Violence in the Middle East. We strongly believe that Kurdish culture, which is being destroyed by Turkey's dam-building, must be not be forgotten in these discussions. The Ilisu dam is just one of 22 dams in Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP). The dams will mostly affect Turkey's Kurdish population, flooding their villages, livelihood and eradicating Kurdish culture. The Tigris and the Euphrates rivers' fragile eco-systems will also be destroyed by these dams.

For a location to become a World Heritage Site, the State Party of a country should compile a list of sites to be considered for inscription. However, Turkey will not apply for Hasankeyf to become a World Heritage Site because it is intent on completing the Ilisu dam. Therefore, we ask UNESCO to visit Hasankeyf and to review this unique area, independent of an application from Turkey. We would like to stress that the need for action is urgent, as the Ilisu dam is almost complete.

We realise that, as the National Commission, you are not an internal part of UNESCO. However, as you are the UK office, we hope that you will listen to our concerns, pass them on within UNESCO and help us with our campaign to save Hasankeyf, the Tigris river and the Iraqi marshes before it is too late.

Over 35,000 people have already signed a petition to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee demanding the protection of Hasankeyf and the Iraqi Marshes.

With regards,

Activists and environmentalists from the UK.

Signed by

NAME/ORGANISATION