

# Bahrain base for archaeologists...

By SANDEEP SINGH GREWAL

BAHRAIN is serving as a base for Iraqi and Syrian archaeologists as they discuss ways to protect and restore historical sites damaged by the Islamic State (IS) terror group.

More than 40 culture and antiquities experts who work for the Iraqi and Syrian governments have taken part in training programmes organised by the Bahrain-based Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage.

Centre director Mounir Bouchenaki told the *GDN* that it was during these programmes last year that the damage done to ancient sites in conflict-hit countries was discussed by the visiting experts.

"We conducted training three times last year in Bahrain for 15 Iraqis who work with their country's tourism and antiquities ministry and some from the environment ministry," said Mr Bouchenaki.

"The centre in Bahrain also arranged a meeting of 22 Syrians from the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Beirut to get an update on the damage done to historical sites."

Bahrain was playing a vital role by arranging these meetings to assist in the preservation of museums, citadels, mosques and other world heritage sites, said Mr Bouchenaki.

He also explained that Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities president Shaikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa was offering her support to the experts and had even extended financial support through the authority to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, which are active in Iraq and Syria.

Earlier this week, IS militants tightened their grip on parts of Syria that are rich in cultural treasures dating back to the times of King Solomon and the Greco-Roman empires.

Officials from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) raised the alarm after the ancient city of Palmyra – one of the most important cultural centres of the



■ Mr Bouchenaki, left, addresses the audience as Mr Friji looks on

ancient world – was overrun.

By some estimates, looted antiquities bring IS more than \$200 million a year in revenue, but Mr Bouchenaki said that number could be even higher.

"Because we cannot send people on the ground in these countries to conduct an assessment of the damages and looted antiquities, it is difficult to give a number," he said.

"But the black market sale of these artefacts could be worth billions."

The *GDN* reported last month that smuggled artefacts from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya were making their way to Bahrain and other Gulf countries.

At that time Mr Bouchenaki revealed that a shipment containing a rare archaeological piece from Lebanon had been intercepted by Bahraini customs officials.

He yesterday delivered a presentation called "Cultural Heritage During Armed Conflicts: The International Community's Duty and Right To Protect", at the International Peace Institute (IPI) Mena regional office in Bahrain Financial Harbour's Harbour House.

The event was attended by diplomats and religious leaders who were shown pictures of

■ Diplomats and religious leaders at the event yesterday

damaged ancient sites in Iraq and Syria.

Video footage that emerged in February was shown, featuring IS militants armed with sledgehammers destroying ancient artefacts dating back 3,000 years at a museum in Mosul.

They also destroyed Nirgal Gate, one of several gates to Ninevah, the one-time capital of the Assyrian Empire.

"These people are filming the destruction of these historical sites and museums," said Mr Bouchenaki.

"The problem is spreading now with the systematic destruction of ancient sites in Libya and even in Yemen.

"We appeal to the international community to consider damage to world heritage sites and other historical places as a war crime and punish the offenders."

The expert said that four years of civil war in Syria had caused untold destruction that would be difficult if not impossible to reverse.

"We cannot reconstruct what is destroyed and even if we did, it would not be original," he said, adding that Italian authorities had proposed the creation of a UN peacekeeping force to protect world heritage sites.

IPI director Nejib Friji said it was about time that radical groups were stopped from destroying the planet's shared history.

"These historical sites should be protected from people destroying them in the name of religion," said Mr Friji.

"They are wiping out the cultural identity for future generations."

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