

# WORLD HERITAGE WATCH

Press release

## **The UNESCO World Heritage System is Dysfunctional The World Heritage Convention Must Become Part of UN Reform**



A review of the 2023 Session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Riyadh

Berlin, 25-09-2023. UNESCO's system for nominating, monitoring and safeguarding World Heritage sites can no longer adequately fulfill its mission. This is the worrying conclusion drawn by World Heritage Watch after the just-ended two-week meeting of the World Heritage Committee - the periodically elected body of 21 states that takes all decisions about world heritage on behalf of the international community.

The UNESCO body suffers from some of the same systemic flaws that cripple the UN Security Council: Member states of the World Heritage Committee can abuse their power and take politically motivated decisions contrary to the obvious facts, while civil society remains consistently excluded from its decision-making processes.

WHW considers the most blatantly wrong decisions to be the committee's refusal to inscribe de-facto acutely endangered sites on the "List of World Heritage in Danger", such as Venice, the fortress and cultural landscape of Diyarbakir, and the volcanoes of Kamchatka, although this had been recommended by its own expert Advisory Bodies.

Sites where ongoing destruction is taking place, such as the Victoria Falls in Zambia/Zimbabwe, and the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest on earth in Bangladesh,

Historic Cairo and the Acropolis of Athens, were not even scheduled for inscription on the so-called "Red List"; in the case of the Acropolis, Greece - itself a committee member - had prevented the site from even appearing on the agenda.

In a backward step that was also regretted off the record by many member state delegations, the Saudi session president allowed NGOs and indigenous peoples to speak only after the decisions had been made, and even then only for two minutes.

Conversely, the World Heritage Committee knew little restraint in inscribing new sites on the World Heritage List. Out of a total of 50 nominations, in 16 cases the Committee inscribed sites against the recommendation of the expert Advisory Bodies. In this context, it is particularly noteworthy that of the 50 nominations, 14 had been submitted by member states of the Committee itself - contrary to a request of an earlier Committee that states should refrain from submitting nominations while they are members of the Committee, in order to avoid the appearance of bias or political influence.

"The common heritage of humanity is being brought to ruin before everyone's eyes," states Stephan Doempke, Chair of World Heritage Watch. "The crisis of multilateralism does not stop at UN Special Agencies such as UNESCO. We therefore call on the 195 States Parties to the World Heritage Convention to initiate a reform of the Rules of Procedure of the World Heritage Committee at their General Assembly in Paris in November to remedy glaring abuses, and to elect states to the Committee that offer greater guarantees of adhering to the spirit and letter of the World Heritage Convention. There is also an urgent need to enshrine a sanctions regime that takes effect when certain objectively verifiable facts are established."

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