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New Law to Protect Morocco Antiquities against Illicit Dealers

By Morocco Times

January 21, 2006

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The Minister of Culture, Mohamed Achaari, underlined to members of the House of Representatives that the new law they adopted Tuesday would protect antiquities against illicit dealers.

"The illicit dealing in antiquities is a universal phenomenon, favoured by certain parties who buy stolen objects," said the minister. "A text authorizing police intervention to protect the national heritage will be promulgated," continued Achaari.

The law project 19/05 modifies and completes law 22/08 concerning the conservation of historic monuments and sites, inscriptions, objects of art and antiquities. But this law only affects movable art objects and antiquities which will be protected against destruction, such as manuscripts. Sanctions vary between fines and imprisonment, according to the nature of the offence.

Historic monuments however, remain governed by the old legislation. There is thus a flagrant juridical void in this field. The delay is due, amongst other things, to the lack of studies and coordination between the concerned parties. These should join their efforts to fight against the illicit trade which threatens the nations' cultural goods and identity, and which is increasing in Morocco. In effect, our country lies at the crossroads of civilizations between the West, the East and Africa.

The phenomenon has taken on worrying proportions in recent years. Buyers have recourse to illegal means to obtain, documents, manuscripts, objects of art, ethnology and archaeology. Excavations on several archaeological sites have had to be stopped for lack of protection. Many national manuscripts have been sold illegally. "Diplomatic bags and private travel are a means of exporting them," the Minister of Culture did not hesitate to declare during a recent study day on this theme.

Morocco is not the only country affected. Even the richest states, equipped with the most sophisticated security systems, suffer from important thefts from public museums and private collections, as well as illegal excavations on protected archaeological sites.