

(Translated from Russian)

Letter from the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

No. 394

The Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva presents its compliments to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and has the honour to convey information from the Russian Federation in response to the communication from the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights regarding the intentional destruction of the cultural heritage.

The Permanent Mission avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office the assurances of its highest consideration.

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Information from the Russian Federation in response to the communication from the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights of the United Nations Human Rights Council regarding the intentional destruction of the cultural heritage as a violation of human rights

On 27 March 2015 Syrian forces supported by the Russian Aerospace Forces completely liberated the antique city of Palmyra, a site on the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), from fighters of the terrorist organization Islamic State.

The International Demining Centre of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, acting on the instructions of the President of the Russian Federation, assisted units of the Syrian army to rid the town of mines.

In April and May 2016 the Russian Engineering Corps conducted extensive mine clearance operations in the historic centre of Palmyra. Significant work was done to deactivate mines, fougasses and other explosive devices in the historic centre of the town. In the course of one and a half months, specialists of the International Demining Centre cleared this part of the town and residential areas from unexploded ordnance. In addition to this, training funded by a unit of the International Demining Centre was organized for mine clearance specialists from among members of the Syrian armed forces' engineering corps.

As a result of this work, unexploded ordnance was removed from 800 hectares of land (including 234 hectares of the historic area), 23 kilometres of roads and paths and 10 heritage sites. More than 2,500 buildings and structures were demined and 17,500 items of unexploded ordnance, including more than 400 improvised explosive devices, were deactivated.

The salient feature of the work carried out was the extreme density of the mines and the use by militias of very powerful radio-frequency remote-controlled and wire-controlled fougasses, a significant quantity of which were fitted with an anti-removal fuse. A not inconsiderable difficulty lay in the fact that it was essential to neutralize and not destroy the detected ammunition, because blowing up the unexploded ordnance might have damaged or destroyed surrounding buildings. The work was rendered more difficult by the large quantity of boob traps left by the militias.

After the completion of the demining work the formidable challenge of preserving and restoring the remaining historic monuments of the antique city lies ahead. The town suffered grievously while Palmyra was in the hands of IS fighters. Some of the priceless cultural monuments were intentionally destroyed and many artefacts were plundered for sale on the black market.

The Russian Federation intends to continue to contribute to the efforts of the international community, in cooperation with Syria, to repair the historic monuments of Palmyra. One of the foremost Russian museums, the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg has expressed a wish to participate in the restoration of the historic monuments of the town.
