

# New Fund for Emergency Aid to Culture: Cultural Emergency Response

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## INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows how war ruins human lives. One only has to look at the daily television news to be reminded of this grim reality. Wars also wreak havoc on those precious and often irreplaceable cultural artefacts which define our human identity. It is bad enough that human lives are severed, yet equally tragic that whole millennia of history can be wiped out in a few seconds of violence.

## PRACTICAL AND EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

Valuable books and treasures were threatened when the Central Library of the University of Baghdad suffered from fire and looting during and after the recent Iraq war. And without a properly functioning academic infrastructure, what hope would there be for a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq?

Expediently, the Cultural Emergency Response (CER), a joint initiative set up in September 2003 by the Prince Claus Fund and the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), donated 25,000 euros for the purchase of computers, air-conditioning equipment, tables, chairs and other basic needs for the library.

The point behind the CER is precisely to intervene speedily to provide emergency aid where traditional cultural heritage is threatened by war or natural disaster. Or, if disaster has already occurred, to ensure that further damage does not take place. The case of the library illustrates another aspect, namely, ensuring continuity after a massive disaster, particularly where the damage is to contemporary cultural heritages.

The Prince Claus Fund strongly believes that a people's past is the foundation of their present. The past provides the materials for their future, so when cultural heritage is destroyed people suffer a fundamental loss, one that is not always

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sufficiently recognized. Hence the essential ideological basis of the CER, which sees its role as an 'Amnesty International for Culture', is respect for the twin principles of freedom of cultural expression and respect for cultural identity.

As it turned out, the library rescue was only the first act in a campaign the CER is waging against cultural devastation. War is not the only culprit. Indeed, natural disasters can be just as damaging. Such was the case in Bam in the south-eastern Kerman province of Iran on 26 December 2003, and in Al Hoceima in Morocco, where more than 530 were killed while they slept, on 24 February 2004.

In both instances the CER demonstrated its flexibility by responding speedily and effectively in ways appropriate to each situation. The response was all the more impressive, given how recently the CER was set up.

### RAMPAGE IN BAGHDAD

The sacking of Baghdad by Mongols in the thirteenth century is an abiding image of Middle Eastern folklore. In the twenty-first century, many feared this fate would reoccur when coalition forces invaded Saddam Hussein's Iraq. As it turned out, the official war was over in less than two months, and the damage, while considerable to army and government installations, was not on the same scale as those earlier ancient sieges. Nonetheless, it soon became clear that cultural sites were being targeted for attacks from a largely unexpected source – international and local looters, who struck during or immediately after the tail end of the official war. Whether they were motivated by the lure of payment for stolen goods, or by sheer vandalism, is not really the issue. The upshot was that priceless treasures, preserved literally over centuries, were either destroyed or spirited away. When the initial shock died down, various foreign museums, universities and academic institutions rushed to offer their help, to hunt down missing artefacts, or to reconstruct and restore structures.

Particularly tragic losses occurred at Baghdad's National Library on 14 April 2003, the

result of looting which the Pentagon later admitted had caught them unprepared. Almost nothing remained of the library's archive of tens of thousands of books, newspapers and manuscripts, many of them centuries old. It later transpired that the looting was highly selective. For instance, the criminals – possibly former government officials – had got rid of potentially incriminating documentation and microfilm collections belonging to Saddam Hussein's 'Republican Archives', dating from 1977 to the present. In the words of Mounir Bouchenaki, deputy director-general of UNESCO, the arson and pillage represented 'a catastrophe for the cultural heritage of Iraq'. Nor was that the end of the matter: in July 2003 a burst water main (possibly the result of armed action) ruined many other Ottoman and British colonial archival documents, and rare and forbidden books, that had been stored away at the Board of Tourism for protection. Plans are now underway to transfer the entire contents of the old library, and rehouse them in a former senior officers club, located on two acres overlooking the Tigris River.

A similar story unfolded at the Iraqi National Museum, from 9 April until American tanks eventually positioned themselves outside the building on 16 April 2003. It seems at least two groups of looters were at work, said Dr Selma Al-Radi, an Iraqi archaeologist and a research associate at New York University: mobs of simple vandals, and professional pilferers presumably working on commission for the arts black market. Not only were filing cabinets smashed and salaries and keys stolen along with expensive cameras belonging to the museum's photographer, but several unique statuettes and other objects also disappeared. These tended to be almost exclusively from the earliest Uruk and Akkadian periods of Iraqi history – items from the very dawn of recorded history.

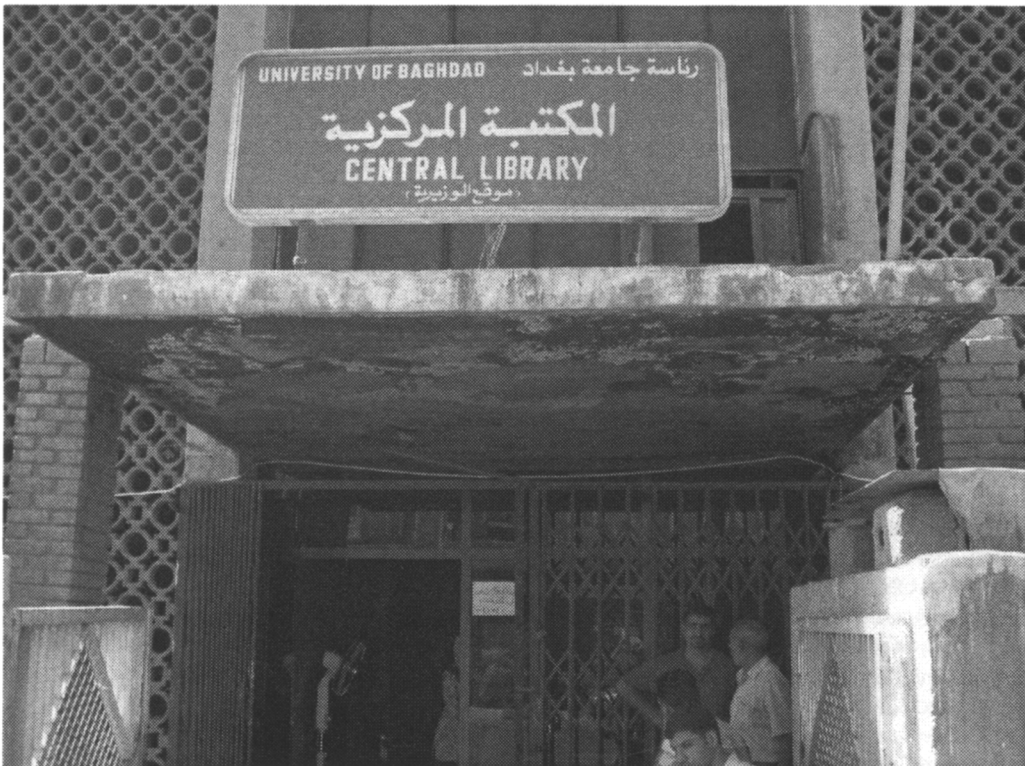
Less well covered by the international media were similar acts of vandalism at the University of Baghdad's Central Library, near the Bab al-Muazzam College of Arts. The CER chose to tackle this particular enterprise after reading a report written by Jean-Marie Arnoult, Inspecteur Général des Bibliothèques in France, on the

damage to archives and libraries caused by the war and the subsequent looting. Arnoult, an authority on archives and libraries in Iraq, took part in the second UNESCO mission in July 2003 and made a number of recommendations for action. In particular, he identified the need for refurbishment of the library reading room.

The CER worked in close liaison with Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Library Adviser Wishyar Muhammed, who identified the most pressing needs and facilitated the purchases. 'Following the collapse of the Saddam regime in April 2003,' he explained, 'not only government offices and public buildings were looted and burned but universities, libraries and museums were not safe from such a barbarous act. We were desperate and thought that the library would never reopen.' So it was with much pride that the CER used the occasion of its launch

to present its cheque for 25,000 euros for the refurbishment of the Central Library reading room.

Accepting the cheque from Ross Shimmon, ICBS Chairman, and myself, from the Prince Claus Fund, Muhammed expressed the feelings of so many Iraqis when he said: 'It was only through the help of some good friends of the Iraqi people and human culture and civilization who showed interest in helping the library, that it became possible to refurbish it once more. Among them was the CER which made a generous donation. On behalf of myself, as a representative of this library and library adviser in the CPA in Baghdad, and also on behalf of all the University's students, its staff and the President of the University, I express my sincere gratitude and thanks to the CER and the Dutch people.'



**Entrance to the Central University Library in Baghdad, Al-Waziriye  
Photo: Wishyar Muhammed**



**Rebuilding of the Central Library at the Bab al-Muazzam  
campus of the University of Baghdad  
Photo: Hala Fattah**

**RESTORING A JEWEL AT THE END OF  
THE SILK ROAD**

For centuries travellers and merchants – and latterly some 30,000 tourists a year – have marvelled at the extraordinary structure known as the Citadel of Bam or Arg é-Bam in Farsi, which is listed by UNESCO as a ‘world cultural heritage site’. The largest surviving mud-built edifice in the world, this ancient building, believed to be based on an original and possibly 3,000-year-old Parthian building, is surrounded by gigantic walls six to seven metres high, and 1,815 metres long. The citadel dominated the horizon of Kerman province in eastern Iran, with its main dome, two huge Bidar-Bash (‘stay-away’) towers, 67 lesser

turrets, ruler’s palace and an interlocking network of ancillary bazaars, stables and dwellings.

Lying along the beginning of the Persian stretch of the old Silk Road, the thoroughfare which literally connected East to West, this vast fortified citadel covered 180,000 square metres, and formed the fulcrum of a once-thriving city. Architecturally, it revealed extraordinary ancient wisdom, and sophisticated forward planning by its engineers. Cleverly placed holes, called ‘wind-catchers’, acted to circulate cooler air, in fact an antique and effective air conditioning system. Likewise, the building had openings on all four sides, so that a constant breeze cooled it down. Moreover, buildings were constructed in four parts, each with particular attributes, and people

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rotated within them according to season. Beyond the citadel and main bazaar lay fields of oases; and beyond the central square, an ancient Iranian gymnasium, called Zurkhaneh.

Once beautiful stucco and lattice windows ornamented these buildings, remnants of which survived down the years, even after Bam was temporarily abandoned after the Afghan invasion of 1722, and after the revived structure fell into disuse around 1850. Such sights, especially in the old quarter, lovingly restored by Iranian architects and historians since 1953, used to entrance visitors and archaeological experts alike – until the devastating earthquake (with a force estimated at 6.6 on the Richter scale) on 26 December 2003 turned so much of Bam into rubble. Some 30,000 people died, more than 80 per cent of buildings were destroyed in the old city, and nearly 60 per cent in the new town.

Initial reports that the citadel itself had been wholly flattened proved exaggerated. Nonetheless, photographs of the bolstering that now props up the damaged dome present a depressing picture. Many temporary work places are now dotted around the citadel, with temporary pathways installed at its former main gate. Technicians gather to plan the arduous task of rescue in prefabricated offices. Aerial photographs show Bam looking like a war zone; although in this instance, the destruction and deaths of upwards of 25,000 townsfolk (out of a population estimated at 78,400) was caused by an act of nature.

How to respond to such a calamity? Research convinced the CER that one overlooked aspect of the affair was the stash of thousands of documents that lay in a research base, deep within the citadel itself. So the CER set as a priority immediate rescue efforts, plus a plan to collect the existing documents from the pre-earthquake periods (aerial photographs, maps, photographs, and so on), and to digitalize them. The CER also began helping with the rescue by documenting the current state of the historic sites (aerial photography, mapping, photogrammetry, laser scanning documentation, digitalization of drawing and maps, and so on).

Working in concert with the Research

Organization for Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Tehran, to which the CER contributed another sum of 25,000 euros, the CER considers this work vital in producing the necessary technical data and information on which the main phase of the restoration of the sites will be planned. Thus a short-term injection of funds, in this instance, should reap large benefits in the longer term.

Clearly, timetables necessarily differ, depending on the individual circumstances. For instance, in Bam the damage is enormous and it will take years to restore and rebuild the historical sites. This requires long-term planning, and commitment of a long duration, to complement the immediate relief that the CER can offer. Such a timetable also requires financial resources and an infrastructure that can cope over the long term with a project that may take years, if not decades, to complete – that is, long after the initial media interest has waned. Hopefully then, visitors will return to this jewel, as they have done in centuries past.

### AL HOCEIMA, MOROCCO

Al Hoceima, a port located in the gap between the Rif Mountains and the coast of North Morocco, was heavily damaged by an earthquake which took place earlier this year on 24 February 2004. It was the worst in Morocco since the Agadir quake of 1960. Humanitarian aid arrived late and, unlike the situation in Bam, hardly any interest was initially shown in the area's damaged cultural heritage.

However, the CER quickly recognized that there was much of value that had been affected, especially as Al Hoceima's mosques and structures represent a symbol of culture to the Imazighen or Berber people who constitute the majority of the population of the town and its environs. For 700 years a proud mosque, both a meeting place and a symbol of religious devotion, has stood in the centre of the old port town. It was built by the Merinids, an Amazigh, or Berber, dynasty who once ruled the entire country, and whose footprint can be seen as far as New Fez and the biggest cemetery/necropolis, Chellah, in Rabat.



**Air photo of the Citadel of Bam and other historic buildings after the earthquake  
Photo courtesy of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization**

The mosque of Mestassa in Al Hoceima is a particularly distinctive version of Merinid architecture. It represents, moreover, a source of cultural pride for the future, as well as a centre point for the daily lives of a large group of people. The Amazigh distinctiveness of this and surrounding buildings has attracted many in the past to its ingenious adaptation to the local geography and topography. In addition, other dwellings display a more contemporary feature: 'clever building', by which present-day builders in North Morocco allow many people to 'store' their 'European' money (or foreign remittances from work abroad, especially in Holland), by investing in a house in their own homeland, out of sight.

The CER feels this awful disaster paradoxically affords the opportunity to put this

notion of 'clever building' on the agenda, by stabilizing and restoring one outstanding structure. By working with a North Moroccan partner, the CER is guaranteeing the rebuilding of local infrastructure. It will use international funds and will thus be able to encourage more development and nurturing from other international bodies. The CER expects that this venture will interest them, and could have an important impact on local life, and, indeed, on the promotion of the cultural identity of the Imazighen, descendants of the original ancient inhabitants of Morocco.

The CER's action to secure the main mosque in Al Hoceima allows it the opportunity to express its solidarity with the large group of Imazighen who live and work in Holland. The project



**The Mosque of Mestassa, Morocco  
Photo: Mohammed Cheikh**

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underlines the CER's commitment to assisting in diverse situations: in this instance, regarding a distinctive monument. In previous instances, the CER bolstered the cultural infrastructure in Baghdad, and saved archival material and documents in a post-disaster situation in Bam. It is important in this early phase of the CER's existence for the organization to 'test' its capabilities in as many different contexts as possible. Hopefully benefits will accrue to the people of Al Hoceima, and to the CER's future efforts.

### **INGENUITY AND PERSPICACITY**

Many felt powerless as they watched those images of looting and destruction in the wake of the March/April 2003 Baghdad war. There was a feeling that if anything could be done, it would be most effective to act now. So it was that the Prince Claus Fund prepared for the creation of the Cultural Emergency Response. It was formally launched on 26 September 2003 in the presence of the fund's Honorary Chairmen, HRH Prince Johan Friso and HRH Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands, at The Prinsenhof Museum, Delft.

Also present was an important guest speaker, Dr. Selma Al-Radi, the Iraqi-born Visiting Professor of Archaeology at Columbia University. She is considered a leading expert on preservation and restoration, and on the art and archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa. A member of both the Getty Conservation Institute and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, as well as an Advisor to the National Museum of Yemen, Al-Radi has led excavation and restoration works in Nimrud (Iraq), Mendes (Egypt), Tunisia, Cyprus, Syria and Yemen.

Speaking from her personal experience, Al-Radi described the ingenuity of the director and staff of the Beirut Museum in 1975. Realizing that the recently sparked civil war was about to run and run (ultimately, for 16 years) they found ways and means of guarding and in some cases spiriting away precious items for safekeeping. Such ingenuity was called for again when the war was over, in 1993, and it was discovered that items placed in underground storerooms had

succumbed to the coastal humidity, and suffered damage from rainwater that had seeped in from an adjoining racecourse.

Likewise, she identified the special challenges of tracking down items from the Kuwait Museum, which housed the private collection of leading members of the ruling Al-Sabah family. These items were looted by the Iraqi invaders of 1990, and many were placed for safekeeping in vaults within the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. Through persistent cross-checking of catalogues and a large measure of mollycoddling bureaucrats, Al-Radi and others managed, after 1991, not only to identify stolen objects (unfortunately only 45 have been recovered out of a list of 4,000), but also to effect their safe transportation back to Kuwait. What an irony, though, that this selfsame Baghdadi institution should be the object of looting 13 years later ...

### **PREPARING THE STRUCTURES**

Notwithstanding the expert advice given by Dr Al-Radi and others at the September 2003 meeting, it was still no easy matter deciding on the modalities of future operations for the CER. Given the immediacy of a disaster, whether natural or man-made, what should the priorities be? At that meeting it was determined that the most pressing aim was to prevent further loss. Each disaster would be assessed in terms of immediate needs, and this would involve both local and international expertise and networks. Such was the case in Baghdad, with the assistance and guidance of Wishyar Muhammed, Library Adviser with the Coalition Provisional Authority; and in Al Hoceima, with the cooperation of community organizations of the indigenous Imazighen (Berber) community and the national government.

Much the same was true regarding the CER's joint efforts with local people in Bam, who determined which items were most valuable and alerted the foreign helpers to the location of old photographs and documents. The CER also worked hand in hand with the Iranian Research Organization for Cultural Heritage and Tourism, whose remit covers all of the Islamic Republic



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including Bam. Once more, the same principles apply: heed local sensitivities, use existing channels for implementing change, and never spurn local knowledge. As the late Prince Claus once put it: 'People are not developed, they develop themselves.'

The Fund also believes it is of paramount importance to assist as far as possible in restitution. A timely response can make a big difference, similar to the value of immediately rendering Red Cross aid to the victim of a car crash. Just as those vital initial minutes can save lives, so expeditious sending of targeted aid can possibly prevent the irredeemable loss of international cultural treasures.

### TERMS OF REFERENCE

It is thus clearly vital to define accurately the terms of reference of the CER, lest expectations are unfairly raised, or plans too ambitiously devised. The central purpose of the CER is to provide limited emergency assistance in the event of damage to, or destruction of, cultural property arising from human-made or natural disasters.

But what precisely do we mean by 'cultural property'? Broadly defined, it includes collections of documents and artefacts, buildings, monuments and sites, representing contemporary, as well as historic, cultural heritage. For guidance, the CER uses the definition of 'cultural property' in the Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands was one of the most active countries in the review procedure

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<sup>1</sup> From The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954. '...the term "cultural property" shall cover, irrespective of origin or ownership: a. movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above;

which culminated in the signing of the convention on 14 May 1954. Since that date several protocols have been added, most recently in March 2004, to the original document which has the full backing of UNESCO. At the last tally 109 countries were registered as parties to the convention, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) continues to urge all countries to ratify. The ICRC believes 'It is essential to strive for universality of these instruments, if the cultural heritage of mankind is to be preserved.'

Once ratified, these texts must be implemented at the national level. This involves, for instance, drawing up inventories, providing for identification of cultural property and setting up educational and training programmes. Once again, the principle of the convention tallies closely with the CER in insisting on using local expertise. Indeed, CER assistance takes the form of providing funding for direct action in order to immediately protect, preserve or restore the cultural property concerned. Naturally, all cases differ, so it would be difficult to draw up a standard list or tool kit for how to respond to disasters. The challenge is to react in an appropriate way – hence the importance of relying on local networks.

Another question that required consideration in September 2003 was whether there were any regions where the CER would not or could not operate. The answer is no – the CER is determined to provide assistance in any part of the world, subject only to the availability of access and appropriate security. In fact, priority will normally be given to countries or regions of the world that are politically and economically unstable.

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b. buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a) such as museums, large libraries and depositories of archives, and refuges intended to shelter, in the event of armed conflict, the movable cultural property defined in subparagraph (a);  
c. centres containing a large amount of cultural property as defined in subparagraphs (a) and (b), to be known as "centres containing monuments".'

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Finally, action is not only important in terms of the donation of money and materials but also for sharing solidarity with those experiencing disaster. Once more, this accords with the essential ethos of the Prince Claus Fund: we live together in one world.

### **ESTABLISHING AN INFRASTRUCTURE**

At the time of writing, the CER intends setting up a permanent and independent CER organization by the end of 2004. To this end it has set up a steering committee consisting of Louk de la Rive Box, Chairman, Joan van Albada, President of the ICBS, and myself, in my capacity as Director of the Prince Claus Fund.

The CER steering committee is responsible for the structure, finance, administration and procedures until an official Board is installed. Moreover, the steering committee decides which requests to support, takes responsibility from that moment and endorses all actions taken on behalf of the CER.

Naturally, nothing would be possible without finance. In its first phase the CER is funded through annual contributions by the two founding agencies, totalling 120,000 euros during each of the first four years. On average, over the first four years, no more than 20 per cent of the budget may be spent on overheads. This means that the cost structure ideally must be based on low fixed costs and high variable costs.

Due to the limited initial budget, the maximum budget per project will be 25,000 euros (as disbursed in each of the three projects enacted to date). By the same token, no long-term projects can be accepted. The CER accepts that the funding will need to expand rapidly if it hopes to be able to grant a more substantial budget per project and still be able to support several projects each year. Preparation and implementation of a fundraising programme will therefore be one of the priorities. Ultimately, the aim is to create a significant, effective and internationally recognized organization.

### **FOUNDING ORGANIZATIONS: PRINCE CLAUS FUND AND ICBS**

Although it was the looting of cultural heritage in Iraq that prompted the Prince Claus Fund and the ICBS to join forces and create the CER, the subsequent disasters in Bam and Al Hoceima prove – if any further proof were necessary – that such a unit is essential. The Fund feels that the CER can benefit from the expertise and experience which the Fund has at its disposal, and through such constituent bodies as the ICBS which comprises the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Equally, the Fund can draw on an extensive network in the field to assist in protecting worldwide cultural heritage from damage and destruction. The Fund believes it is of fundamental importance to prevent loss of contemporary and traditional cultural heritage and, where damage has occurred, to assist as far as possible in restitution.

At the heart of this exercise is the Fund's profound belief that culture is a basic human need. Cultural expression and cultural heritage are essential to everyone's identity. The Fund was established in 1996 on the seventieth birthday of its founder, and former adviser to the Dutch government on development cooperation, the late HRH Prince Claus of The Netherlands. It strives to further his ideals, in particular the assertion that a people's own ideas and ideals are the driving force of their development. The Prince felt keenly that culture and development are intimately linked. Indeed, a project is only deemed worthwhile if it genuinely respects difference, honours people's dignity and believes in their ability to direct their own lives and culture.

The Prince Claus Fund always takes into consideration the positive effects that activities will have within a wider social and cultural

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context. It defends people who are hampered in their work in culture and development. The obstruction may be political or social. Great expertise and sensitivity to the subtleties of political and social relations in the countries concerned are required to fulfil this role. The Fund therefore collaborates with external advisers and organizations that possess this expertise. In this way it has developed into an

international network of people and organizations that are able to assess, advise and assist regarding matters of culture and development. And, in every instance – whether in Baghdad, in Bam, in Al Hoceima, or in happenings or horrors to come – the guiding principle is: listen to the people on the ground.

More information on: [www.princeclausfund.nl](http://www.princeclausfund.nl)

### ABSTRACT

The Cultural Emergency Response (CER) is a joint initiative established in September 2003 in the Netherlands by the Prince Claus Fund and the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS). The CER's aim is to provide emergency aid where cultural heritage is threatened by war or natural disaster. The article describes a number of instances where aid has been provided: the refurbishment of the reading room of the Central Library of the University of Baghdad; the collection and digitization of documents relating to the Citadel of Bam in Iran, devastated by the earthquake of 26 December 2003; and stabilizing and restoring the mosque of Mestassa in Al Hoceima, Morocco, damaged by the earthquake of 24 February 2004. The terms of reference, structure, funding and priorities of the CER are outlined. The initiative reflects the belief of the Prince Claus Fund that culture is a basic human need. It has been successful in establishing an international network of people and organizations able to assess, advise and assist regarding matters of culture and development, strengthening its role as an 'Amnesty International for Culture'.