Conflicts: Berne calls for punishing attacks on heritage

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The Swiss government wants to make the responsible parties for cultural destruction in conflict zones liable. It will host discussions to convince several countries to take action to protect cultural assets.

From Mali to Iraq, these cultural destructions have been "the most important since the Second World War" and are "intolerable", said the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Pascale Baeriswyl. These crimes have already been recognized for the first time as crimes of war and the responsible parties have been condemned. "We must ensure that these acts are not unpunished", Mme Baeriswyl said at the start of a two-day conference on cultural heritage organized by UNESCO in the presence of the confederation of Switzerland.

The federal council has decided to launch a new policy to conclude new bilateral agreements on the importation and the return of cultural goods illegally exported. This will also improve the procedures for legal proceedings.

The Geneva conference has been scheduled to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Corfu Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 on cultural heritage protection in conflict zones. More than 80 countries, including Switzerland, are parties to this accord. It covers about 200 sites that the combatants are still to protect.

And in the meantime, the Secretary of State hopes that this arrangement will help "to improve the visibility of cultural heritage on the international stage". Switzerland will strive for it to remain beyond the States involved.

More than 250 people have gathered for the conference in Geneva, including ministers of the culture of the countries affected by cultural destruction in conflict zones. The participants must evaluate the implementation of the Protocol.

Several institutions are active in Geneva on these projects. Among them, the International Alliance for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Conflict (ALIPH), founded a little over two years ago, is entering a new phase.

She had previously supported the rehabilitation of the Mossoul Museum and the restoration of the monastery of Mar Behnam, damaged and plundered by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, as well as the tomb of the Askia in Gao in Mali.

ALIPH plans to support refugees for threatened works in the countries concerned and in other countries. In this context, Geneva was joined by several municipalities on a Declaration to set up a new network of urban refuges.

Switzerland, which supports ALIPH, proposed, before the launch of the organization, to establish a tool for temporary conservation of artworks at Affoltern am Albis (ZH). But no one has so far responded to this offer.
"concrète" n'a encore eu lieu, a dit à Keystone-ATS le responsable de cette question au sein de l'administration fédérale, Rino Büchel.

Selon la Suisse, les Etats peuvent aussi utiliser le Second protocole pour prévenir les conséquences des catastrophes naturelles ou techniques sur les biens culturels. Berne a mené un inventaire et étendu le lien entre collectivités. Le numérique constitue aussi un instrument sur cette question.