

Extremist Pleads Guilty to destroying Cultural Property in Mali

Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, a member of an extremist group named Ansar Dine, which is linked to Al Qaeda, pleaded guilty on 22nd August 2016 at the International Criminal Court (ICC) to destroying UNESCO protected shrines and damaging a mosque in the ancient city of Timbuktu, Mali, in the court's first prosecution of the destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime. Also, it is the first time that an alleged offender prosecuted at the ICC has pleaded guilty. Prosecutors said that he took part in the destruction of a number of venerable centuries-old mud and stone buildings holding the tombs of holy men and scholars.

He faces a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison, but prosecutors will request a sentence of nine to eleven years as part of a plea agreement. Mr. Mahdi said to be is suspected of committing other crimes, but the case was narrowly focused to highlight how cultural and religious buildings are deliberately singled out for destruction to obliterate an enemy's history and identity. The judgment is scheduled to be delivered on 27th September 2016.

The case comes at a time of heightened international concern about the fate of many cultural and religious monuments in the Middle East and North Africa. Places of worship, artworks and archaeological remnants, libraries, museums and other treasured sites have been destroyed by extremist groups who call them pagan or heretical, including the giant Buddha statues at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001, and more recently Nimrud, Palmyra and other pre-Islamic sites in Iraq and Syria.