

US condemns Mali attacks as cultural 'assault'

By AFP

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WASHINGTON — The United States expressed outrage Wednesday at the destruction of ancient Muslim saints' tombs by Islamists occupying northern Mali, calling the scourge an "assault" on African heritage.

Members of Ansar Dine (Defenders of Faith), an Al-Qaeda-linked armed group that has been in control of northern Mali for over three months, on Tuesday destroyed two tombs in Timbuktu's oldest and biggest mosque, Djingareyber.

Last week, they destroyed seven tombs of ancient Muslim saints as well as the sacred door of another 15th century mosque, all listed as endangered World Heritage sites by UNESCO.

"The United States strongly condemns the destruction of Muslim shrines and other religious and historic sites in Timbuktu by Islamic militants," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in a statement.

"We are outraged by the continued destruction of these World Heritage Sites and the ongoing intimidation of local populations."

She called for an "immediate end to these destructive and irreversible acts" and urged all sides to protect the "invaluable cultural heritage" of the sites.

Ansar Dine militants have vowed to destroy all similar sites in the fabled city, which they say are "haram" or forbidden by Islam.

"This is an assault not just on Mali but on the heritage of all Africans, and those responsible for these acts should be brought to justice," Nuland said.

"We remain deeply concerned about the situation of the Malian people."

She said Washington supports the mediation efforts of West African countries and the African Union in returning civilian rule to the country and crushing the rebellion in the north.

The United States is calling for all parties to ensure "impartial and unhindered" humanitarian access to all civilians in northern Mali, Nuland said.

"We strongly insist that all actors in Mali respect human rights and international humanitarian law," she added.

"The people of Mali deserve to live in a secure environment free from fear and oppression where their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms -- including the freedoms of religion and of expression -- are protected and respected."

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