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Armed Militants Resume Destruction of Timbuktu Shrines

by Nancy Palus

DAKAR — The militant group Ansar Dine has resumed the destruction of Muslim shrines in the northern Malian city of Timbuktu. The group attacked a shrine Tuesday at one of Timbuktu's oldest mosques, a site regularly visited by local Muslims. Residents said the group fired in the air to discourage people assembling in the city.

Residents say that around 8 a.m. local time on Tuesday, militants of the Islamist group Ansar Dine took pickaxes and shovels to what locals call one of the ancient city's most prominent burial sites, situated at the west end of the Djingareyber mosque.

Djingareyber is one of the three most prominent mosques in Timbuktu, a capital of Islamic scholarship classified as a World Heritage site by the United Nations cultural agency [UNESCO](#).

A resident of Timbuktu who did not want his name used for reasons of security said one of the people buried at the site was considered a powerful saint and was constantly consulted by the population of Timbuktu as well as by foreigners.

He said residents are deeply angry and offended at these acts of destruction. He said access to the mosque was completely cut off by armed men as others went about demolishing the site.

Residents said Ansar Dine gunmen fired in the air when they saw more than a few people gathering.

Ansar Dine, the Islamist group that swept into northern Mali with Tuareg separatist rebels in late March, regards such shrines as idolatrous and therefore prohibited in Islam. Last month Ansar Dine and other Islamist groups pushed the Tuaregseparatist group MLNA out of Timbuktu and the city of Gao.

Timbuktu residents said as difficult as it is for the population to witness the destruction, local elders have advised residents not to react.

The same Timbuktu resident said the imams and elders of Timbuktu have advised the youth not to give in to what they call a provocation - they said that justice will be done in the end. He said "we see this as wise advice, because the youths here are unarmed. We've got the Sahara Desert on one side and the Niger River on the other - if clashes were to break out the people would have nowhere to run."

Just over a week ago Ansar Dine militants destroyed several Muslim shrines in Timbuktu, triggering worldwide condemnation. The assault came just after UNESCO put Timbuktu on its list of sites "in danger."

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee on July 2 called for the creation of a special fund to help Mali conserve its cultural heritage. The Committee appealed to UNESCO member states, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to give to the fund.