

Russia builds military camp near ancient Syrian town of Palmyra

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Beirut: Russia has built a military encampment inside a zone that holds the UNESCO world heritage site in the ancient Syrian town of Palmyra, where Islamic State militants were driven out recently by pro-government forces.

The Russian military described the camp Tuesday as "temporary," saying its few housing units were being used by explosives experts who are removing mines left behind by the militants, and that the Syrian government had given approval to build the camp.

The head of Syria's Antiquities and Museums department, who noted the town's priceless antiquities are safer thanks to the Russian presence, nonetheless said he would not have granted Russia permission to build the camp if he had been asked.

A UNESCO official said it was unclear whether the encampment was in a buffer zone to the archaeological site, but said it does not pose a threat to the historic area.

The American School of Oriental Research's Cultural Heritage Initiative posted photos from the satellite imagery and analytics company DigitalGlobe that show the construction on the edge of the ancient site that was damaged by the Islamic State group, which held Palmyra for 10 months.

Syrian troops backed by Russian airstrikes captured Palmyra in March and fighting continues nearby. In recent weeks, IS fighters launched an offensive in which they captured a nearby gas field that brought them close to the town.

Russian demining experts have found and detonated hundreds of bombs left behind by IS at and near the site since the town was recaptured.

Maamoun Abdulkarim, head of Syria's Antiquities and Museums Department, told The Associated Press that the Russians have built a small barracks that includes offices and clinics.

Abdulkarim said his organization was not asked for permission but added that the presence of Russian and Syrian troops is important to ensure that the site remains in government hands.

"We refuse to give permission even if it was for a small room to be built inside the site" whether it is for the Syrian army, Russian army or anyone else," Abdulkarim said by telephone from Damascus. "We will never give such permission because this will be in violation of the archaeology law."

Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, a spokesman for the Russian Defense Ministry, said Syrian authorities had given permission.

"The deployment of this temporary camp through the end of the demining effort has been fully agreed upon with the Ministry of Culture and other Syrian agencies," he said in a statement. "Along with housing modules, it also has a field hospital providing medical assistance to the local population and field bakery, whose production is also handed out to the Syrians."

Konashenkov added that UNESCO experts were among those who attended a concert this month in Palmyra by St. Petersburg's Mariinsky orchestra with renowned Russian conductor Valery Gergiev.

Russian combat engineers have defused about 18,000 explosives around Palmyra since it was recaptured, he added.

During their 10 months in Palmyra, the IS militants destroyed the Temple of Bel, which dated back to A.D. 32, the Temple of Baalshamin, which was several stories high and fronted by six towering columns, and the Arch of Triumph, which was built under the Roman emperor Septimius Severus between A.D. 193 and A.D. 211.

"During the time of war, sometimes archaeological authorities don't have a say but security decisions dictate the orders," Abdulkarim said. "Once the situation improves and peace is reached, then we will openly call for removing" the barracks.

The controversy highlights the complexities and sensitivities inherent in the Syrian civil war, with government forces, foreign fighters and multiple militias battling across a country that contains archaeological treasures.

The American School of Oriental Research said images released April 22 showed the new structures inside the Northern Necropolis within the boundary of the site and "in close proximity to numerous aboveground and subsurface tombs and funerary temples."

Two new paved roads connecting them to the main road can be also seen, it said, adding that imagery from May 10 showed a paved helicopter landing pad and military vehicles.

"The militarization of vulnerable archaeological areas can cause significant damage to fragile heritage assets," ASOR said. "Digging and grading have a direct negative impact on archaeological remains, while military equipment, including helicopters and vehicle and heavy weaponry create significant vibration that gradually undermine and erode subsurface features."

Abdulkarim said he was unaware of a helicopter landing pad.

Osama al-Khatib, an opposition activist from Palmyra who lives in Turkey, said the Russians' prefabricated units were on the northern edge of the archaeological site, hundreds of meters (yards) from the temples and the Arch of Triumph. Some historical graves also are nearby, he said.

UNESCO's media office would not comment, saying the agency is "still in the process of establishing and verifying the facts on the ground."

A UNESCO official who visited the Palmyra site last month said if the encampment were in the buffer zone to the site, it would be in contravention to international treaties protecting historic zones. Syria is a signatory to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

"We're going to look at the satellite pictures to see if it is inside the buffer zone," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

The official, who also said the camp was temporary, noted that Islamic State militants were not far away and could try to re-enter Palmyra.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported fighting between IS and government forces in the village of Ameriyeh, near Palmyra.

An IS-linked page on Instagram said its fighters captured three positions near the Jazal gas field northwest of Palmyra

and killed some troops. Jazal is about 25 kilometers (15 miles) northwest of the ancient town.

Since Russia began its airstrikes in September 2015, Moscow has tipped the balance of power in favor of President Bashar Assad's forces. Earlier this year, Moscow said it was scaling back its presence in Syria.

Before IS captured Palmyra in May 2015, the Syrian army was known to have a minor military presence inside the site.

- AP