

Press release, Belgian Committee of the Blue Shield asbl, 3 February 2017

After the attacks of 22 March 2016, the Federal Government asserted its determination to combat terrorism in our country. However, by royal decree of 27 October 2015 establishing the repartition of the personnel of the Federal Police (Belgian Monitor of 30 October 2015) it **decided to abolish the 'Art & Antiques' section of the Federal Judicial Police**, which endeavours to fight the illicit trafficking of works of art.

It is nevertheless well known that the illicit traffic in works of art is one of the sources of finance for international terrorism. In his discourse of 17 November 2015 at UNESCO, President Hollande of France made the fight against the illicit traffic in works of art a priority for action: *The first of these priorities is the fight against the illicit trafficking in cultural property. It is important to know that at this moment, the terrorist organisation IS delivers archaeological permits and raises taxes on the works that will then supply the international black market, passing through French ports, havens for the handling and money-laundering, including in Europe.*

At the present time, several western countries are dedicating **more staff and resources** to combat the illicit trafficking of works of art. This is the case in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain (24 staff versus 8 beforehand), the United States of America (16 staff versus 6 before) and above all France, which has a specialised unit of 25 people. Other countries are taking similar measures. Belgium is therefore resolutely marching against the tides of history.

In international colloquiums, Belgium was clearly identified as a main hub of the illicit trafficking of works of art. In abolishing - particularly now - the 'Art and Antiquities' unit of the Federal Judicial Police, our country does not give the right signals. Several national and international organisations, namely INTERPOL and the UN, complained to the Federal Government about this measure, pointing out that **Belgium is no longer able to fulfil its international obligations.** Furthermore, the abolition of the judiciary unit 'Art & Antiquities' risks damaging the reputation of Belgium, already tarnished by criticism after the Paris attacks for the way in which our country handles the fight against terrorism.

In abolishing the 'Art & Antiquities' unit, a specialised contact group disappears. It will no longer be possible to reply to specific questions from Interpol, foreign customs services and other authorities and international organisations. Even worse, the database that is managed by this judicial section will no longer be updated. **Belgium will become the weak link in the battle against the financing of terrorism and the illicit trafficking of works of art.** It will be very difficult to repair the damage which will result and considerable financial means will be needed.

More alarmingly, Paris Match revealed recently that **'one of the perpetrators of the deadly attacks at Zaventem airport and Maelbeek metro station in March of this year actively participated in the trafficking of works of art in Belgium, and relatively recently. Around him were other characters, apparently linked to Salah Abdeslam.'** Without being able to confirm that there could be a link between the attacks in Brussels and the illicit trafficking of works of art, this information should underline that the negligence of the Federal Government could cost us all dearly.

Petition

Minister of the Interior,
Minister of Justice,

In abolishing the 'Art & Antiquities' unit of the Federal Judicial Police, you are putting Belgian citizens, as well as the citizens of other countries, in danger.

The fight against terrorism, and therefore its financing, must be one of your priorities.

We ask you to reverse your decision to abolish the 'Art & Antiquities' unit of the Federal Judicial Police, and to work towards strengthening it. We want see the restoration of Belgium's image abroad through the respect of its international obligations and by lending support to the efforts to prevent new innocent victims.

The authors of the petition:

Myriam Serck-Dewaide
Gustaaf Janssens

The Belgian committee of the Blue Shield asbl, is a coordinating body bringing together representatives of Belgian authorities, both federal and federated, and international organisations, including experts in the protection and management of cultural heritage. It works towards the enforcement of compliance with The Hague Convention of 1954 and its Protocols in relation to the protection of cultural property in the case of armed conflict. <http://www.blueshieldbelgium.be/francais/fr/index.htm>