

New Zealand army denies damaging Afghanistan Buddha statues

The New Zealand army denied Sunday damaging the ruins of one of Afghanistan's famous Bamian Buddha statues while detonating an unexploded rocket in the area.

Najibullah Harar, head of the information and culture department in Bamian province, was reported as saying a controlled explosion by New Zealand army bomb disposal experts had damaged one of the remaining Buddha statues.

The radical Taliban government that ruled Afghanistan in 1996-2001 blew up the historic Buddha statues - nearly 2,000 years old and 55-metres and 38-metres tall - saying they defied strict Islamic law.

Harar was quoted as saying the New Zealanders, who have a provincial reconstruction team in the area, had damaged the ruins of the smaller of the two statues.

A statement from New Zealand defence force headquarters in Wellington said bomb disposal experts with the team had been asked by the Disarmament of Illegally Armed Groups (DIAG) to safely detonate an 85 mm anti-tank rocket found as part of a cache of ordnance in the vicinity of the statues in Bamian township.

'Due to its vicinity to the historic site the detonation was delayed so key people could be informed of the need to dispose the rocket. The governor of the province, Habiba Sorabi, United Nations organisations and agencies and local police authorities were advised of the task.'

The statement said the rocket was detonated following correct operating procedures on May 1 behind a cordon provided by local Afghani police.

'In conducting the demolition, 15 full sandbags were placed onto the rocket to absorb blast and fragmentation.' An inspection then revealed a crater about 400 mm in diameter and 150 mm deep.

'It was considered highly unlikely that the ordnance could have inflicted any damage to the surrounding area,' the statement said, adding that further site inspections, including by the head of the UN mission in Bamian, concluded there had been no damage to the Buddha statue.

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