



VILLAGERS' PROTEST AT ISTANBUL'S TOPKAPI PALACE DRAWS ATTENTION TO IMPENDING LOSS OF WORLD HERITAGE IN THEIR HOMETOWN

Planned Ilisu dam will inundate 12,000-year history including the ancient town of Hasankeyf

26th January 2012, Istanbul, Turkey - Tourists today experienced the deprivation of enjoying one of Istanbul's most iconic cultural and historical monuments as villagers from the historical town of Hasankeyf in the southeast of Turkey blocked the entrance of Topkapi Palace (1) to draw attention to the impending loss of their ancient town threatened by a major dam.

The protestors placed signs reading 'No Entry' and cordoned off the entrance to the palace holding images of historical sites from the Tigris Valley and Hasankeyf that date back thousands of years. The villagers opened a banner reading 'UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES TOPKAPI-HASANKEYF, CANNOT BE RELOCATED'.

"Our town Hasankeyf, together with the Tigris valley, will be inundated if the planned Ilisu dam goes ahead. The government closed down parts of the historical town in 2010 and the Minister in charge of the dam project, Veysel Eroglu, is claiming that they will move Hasankeyf to another location. Just as Topkapi Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, cannot be moved, Hasankeyf - which deserves the same title - cannot be moved to another location either," said Ismail Kocyigit, a retired Imam from Hasankeyf.

Hasankeyf, with the surrounding Tigris Valley, is the only place in the world that meets nine out of 10 criteria for a UNESCO World Heritage Site according to a report published by Istanbul University Prof Zeynep Ahunbay, who is also president of ICOMOS Turkey (International Council on Monuments and Sites) (2). Yet the Turkish government refuses to include the region in the UNESCO list.

Engin Yilmaz, Executive Director of Doga Dernegi (Nature Association), joined the protest with volunteers from the conservation organisation. He said: "If the planned Ilisu Dam is built, it would be the second biggest dam in Turkey and cause the displacement of tens of thousands people (3), the extinction of many species in the Tigris Valley and it would destroy naturally important habitats and hundreds of historical sites that date back 12,000 years including the ancient town of year-old Hasankeyf."

Since Hasankeyf was declared a "protected area" in 1981 the locals have been denied permission to carry out any needed restoration of their houses. At the same time the government has not invested in Hasankeyf since, leading to the area's dilapidation.

In addition to drawing attention to the impending loss of an invaluable historical and cultural legacy, the protestors highlighted the tourism potential in the area and the economic benefits that could be gained if investment were made into preserving and promoting this heritage.

Hamdiye Öztekin who attended the protest with her husband and daughter from Hasankeyf drew a comparison with Cappadocia, which enjoys a number of similarities with the villagers' hometown: "The world-renowned tourist destination of Cappadocia was declared a World Heritage Site in the 80s, and since then it generates over 600 million dollars a year (4) following investment made in the area. Yet, we are being denied the right to live in our hometown and enjoy the economic benefits possible through the tourism potential that Hasankeyf and Tigris Valley's unique nature and history offers."

Human settlements in Hasankeyf date back to prehistoric times. The notable artefacts include: The Castle that dates back to the 4th century, the bridge built in the 12th century which is the biggest stone bridge of the Middle Ages, and the Eyyubi Sultan Suleiman's grave located in the town.

The residents of Hasankeyf together with Doga Derneği, called on Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to revise its Ilisu Dam plans and include Hasankeyf and the Tigris Valley in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list.

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Notes:

- (1) Topkapi Palace became a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) in 1985.
- (2) Prof Ahunbay's report can be found at:
<http://hasankeyf.dogaderneği.org/files/outstanding-universal-value-of-hasankeyf-and-the-tigris-valley2712.pdf>
- (3) A report by World Bank expert Ayse Kudat puts the figure of people actually affected at 19,000-34,000, and the number of people potentially affected at 55,000-78,000.
<http://www.evb.ch/en/p25000556.html>
- (4) Kayseri Cappadocia Tourism Cluster Final Report, ABIGEM, November 2009.

Photos:

Images 1,2 and 3: Hasankeyf villagers calling for the protection of their ancient town in south east Turkey which is threatened by the Ilisu dam, stand at Istanbul's Topkapi Palace saying that just as such a Unesco World Heritage Site cannot be moved so their hometown which deserves the same title cannot be relocated. (Photos by IF Atolye)

Image 4: A retired Imam and a family from historical Hasankeyf demands the cancellation of Ilisu dam which threatens their hometown during a protest at Istanbul's Topkapi Palace. (Photo by IF Atolye)