UNESCO likely to recognize West Bank village's terraces as heritage site

Designation expected to aid legal battle against separation fence near West Bank village.

By Nir Hasson | Dec.06, 2012 | 1:32 AM | 4

UNESCO has informed the Palestinian Authority that it will accelerate the process of recognizing the ancient terraces near the West Bank village of Battir as a world heritage site.

The Palestinians, along with green organizations, hope the designation will aid their battle against the separation fence that Israel is building near Battir, south of Jerusalem.

The letter to the PA from the head of UNESCO’s Ramallah office was attached to a new petition against the fence submitted to the High Court of Justice by Friends of the Earth-Middle East and a group of Jewish residents of the region. The petition focuses on the harm the fence would do to the ancient terraces, and hence to world heritage.
An earlier petition against the route near Battir, which was submitted about a month ago by the village's Palestinian residents, focused on the harm the fence would cause them.

A UNESCO delegation is supposed to go to Battir later this month to examine the terraces, and the PA will make its final submission to UNESCO by the end of January. UNESCO's debate on the request is expected to take place in mid-2013.

The Battir terraces are considered both the oldest and the largest in the Judean Hills. They have been cultivated and irrigated via traditional methods for hundreds of years, and perhaps even thousands, and are almost certain to be recognized as a world heritage site. They are expected to be recognized as both a natural and a human heritage site, which is very rare: Only five other sites worldwide have received such double recognition.

In addition to the UNESCO letter, the new petition also included opinions from various preservation experts, as well as the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel. All argued that the fence would destroy the site's human and natural uniqueness. To back this argument, the petition also includes computer-simulated pictures of how the site would look once the fence was built.

Attorney Michael Sfard, who drew up the petition, argued in it that damaging the site would violate international conventions on preserving heritage sites that Israel has signed. He also argued that the current route of the fence is meant to avoid damaging the old Jerusalem-Tel Aviv railroad, but that line is due to be shut down in another few years anyway, once the new Jerusalem-Tel Aviv line is built.

"In other words, the current route will sacrifice an incomparably sensitive site that has existed for thousands of years in order to serve a railway line that is slated to be taken out of operation in another few years," the petition said.

Gidon Bromberg, Israeli director of Friends of the Earth-Middle East, said it's "important to note that we aren't talking about Palestinian heritage or Israeli heritage; this is the shared heritage of the entire region, and of all humanity. This region has seen wars throughout history. What right do we have to destroy a 5,000-year-old heritage because of our conflict? And especially when there are other means that can be used to solve the security problem."

The Defense Ministry, however, insists that the route was planned to minimize harm to the terraces. "The planned fence isn't expected to cause substantial harm to the terraced landscape or the existing irrigation system," it said in a statement, since various measures were taken to protect the terraces. These included locating the fence a mere three meters from the railway line and leaving out certain security components, "thereby taking security risks in order to minimize damage to the fabric of life and the landscape," it added.