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Italy urged to rescue monuments

ROME (AP) — Air pollution and traffic vibration have damaged many of Rome's ancient monuments so badly that access to them will have to be restricted if they are to be saved, Italy's supervisor of antiquities warns.

"The problem is as serious as that of the Acropolis in Athens, and on a much larger scale, because it involves the whole city," Adriano La Regina said in an interview.

"The main problem is not so much the cost of restoring the monuments, which will be enormous. It is what will have to be done to reorganize the city."

La Regina, who presented a report on the situation to the Italian government's Council for the Arts last week, said within a few weeks access to some of Rome's monuments will be restricted to facilitate restoration work and to try to protect them from further deterioration.

Parking will be banned in the Piazza Colonna around the Antonine Column. Motor traffic will be barred around the Arch of Constantine near the Colosseum and on the street between the Campidoglio and the Forum, at least while the monuments are being restored.

Several fragments fell off the Antonine Column last month, and traffic between the Campidoglio and the Forum has seriously damaged the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Forum.

Over the past decade, motor traffic has been progressively restricted in certain parts of downtown Rome.

"I would like to see traffic around these monuments limited in future to essential public transport," La Regina said. "It might not be a popular measure, but it is the only way to limit the effects of exhaust fumes and traffic vibrations."

In the past 25 years, Rome's population has doubled and traffic has become extremely congested in the center of the city, where the famous arches, columns and temples are located.

Over the years, exhaust fumes have settled on the monuments, the rain has turned them to acids, and they have eaten away the features of faces in reliefs and imperceptibly chipped away at the columns. The disintegration is spurred by the vibration from steady streams of vehicles passing over nearby cobblestone streets.

Tourists tend to dismiss the sorry appearance of the monuments as the result of their great age. But Italian archeologists are no longer willing to remain silent.

"A series of studies and tests done

on monuments in downtown Rome demonstrate without a shadow of doubt that within a few decades we will lose all the basic documentation of the history of Roman art," said La Regina. "Such a loss makes any other care of archeological treasures senseless."

"Some monuments have been very seriously and irreversibly damaged. The only thing we can do now is prevent further damage, but what has been lost is gone forever."

"We must dramatize the matter to the government and to the city so that the causes of the damage can be studied scientifically and proper measures undertaken, whatever the cost, unless one wishes to assume the political responsibility for a cultural choice which condemns works of art."

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