LAHORE - The Government of Pakistan is allegedly ignoring the visa requests by Unesco for the members of its Reactive Monitoring Mission, which wants to visit sites of Orange Line Metro Train Project from 9th to 12th January.

The Unesco has repeatedly urged the Punjab government to stop work on the Orange Line Metro Train project in the area of heritage site Shalimar Gardens.

In a letter, copy of which is available with The Nation, the government was urged to facilitate the Unesco Mission that wants to investigate dangers posed to the world heritage site so that it may give its recommendations.

This apparent obstruction of the Reactive Mission goes against Pakistan’s formal commitment to the World Heritage Convention, ratified in 1972.

Reactive Monitoring Missions are part of the statutory reporting by the Secretariat and the Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Committee on the State of Conservation of specific properties that are under threat.

The RMM members desire to visit Lahore in order to review the management and protection arrangements of the property, with a view to considering whether there is an ascertained or potential danger to the outstanding universal value of the property.

Ms Junhi Han, the Programme Specialist of World Heritage Centre Asia and Pacific Unit of UNESCO, in an email reply, informed activist Kamil Khan Mumtaz that "... [The] Reactive Monitoring mission to Shalimar Gardens, requested by the 40th session of the World Heritage Committee, will be undertaken from 9 to 12 January 2017, pending confirmation from the Government of Pakistan."

"...the decision adopted by the above-mentioned World Heritage Committee session (40 COM 7B.43) requested the State Party to invite a joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring mission to the World
Heritage property Shalimar Gardens, as soon as possible."

The forthcoming mission would like to seek consultations with the civil society in Lahore during the period of its mission.

Han said: "As of today, we have not received a proposed provisional programme from the Government of Punjab yet, however, as soon as this has been received at the World Heritage Centre…"

Prior to this, a letter was written by World Heritage Centre Director Mechtild Rossler to Ghalib Iqbal, Ambassador and Pakistan's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO, on 29th October 2015 regarding the OLMT and Shalimar Gardens (Fort and Shalimar Gardens World Heritage property) states the OLMT Project can result in serious irreversible damage to Shalimar Gardens and it should be stopped.

The same is stated in the Draft Decision 2016 by the WHC. The Adopted Decision 2016 by the WHC maintains this stance. The WHC should request the Pakistani government to invite a joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring Mission to the property at its earliest convenience, to examine the project and to discuss the same with relevant government authorities.

International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) has also strongly protested against the delaying tactic of government and requests an early processing and issuing of visas to all members of UNESCO’s Reactive Monitoring Mission.

"If the Metro Line indeed poses no threat to listed heritage as the Punjab government claims, there is no reason why the government should not welcome the RMM in compliance with Pakistan’s international and legal commitments," ICOMOS said in a statement.

“RMM is part of the statutory reporting by the Secretariat and the advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee. The costs of the Reactive Monitoring Missions are borne by the World Heritage Fund. There is no reason why this Mission should not be facilitated by the Government of Punjab."

This news was published in The Nation newspaper. Read complete newspaper of 06-Jan-2017 here.