6.4 Man-made Disasters

6.4.1 Introduction
Even if it is true that our libraries are overflowing with books, never before in the history of mankind has there been a century as destructive to books as the twentieth. Two world wars and numerous armed conflicts have exacted their toll, many totalitarian regimes have purged libraries of publications and what is left is often damaged by water or fire. Man has been more destructive to the cultural heritage than nature. Most of this damage is caused willfully. To list all the causes of destruction and damage in a worldwide frequency and priority order is not feasible. Each region has its specific range of problems (Hoeven et al., 1996).

Record custodians may think of disasters as large, catastrophic events such as tornadoes or floods—dramatic natural events over which there is little, if any, control. Yet many disasters are events that only affect records within a single repository. But whether large or small, disasters can threaten the security of records. A single fire or flood can erase substantial portions of the unique recorded history of a community. To prepare for a disaster, we must first become aware of the potential dangers records face (Read, 1994).

ICOMOS, the international NGO dedicated to the conservation of the world's historic monuments and sites, has made its most recent report on Monuments and Sites in Danger available. From more than 60 countries the whole range of man-made dangers to cultural heritage is mapped, from the criminality of illegal excavations, the looting of churches for the international art trade, to the impacts of mass global tourism. The report is a first step toward recognising and recording monuments at risk, collecting information about the dangers they face, promoting action where catastrophes have already occurred, inspiring further commitments on national and international levels and providing an additional positive impulse for existing institutions already at work in this field (Bumbbaru, 2000).

The following man-made disasters can be distinguished and will be briefly discussed below: war, theft; neglect and vandalism.

For further reading on security in general see Agebunde, 1988; Baxi, 1974a; Liston, 1993; Menges, 1990; Nwamefor, 1974; Onadiran, 1986; Shepilova, 1992; Soete et al., 1999; Teferra, 1986; Thapisa, 1982.

6.4.2 War
In situations of war archives are exposed to severe risks. It would take a very long time to compile a list of all the libraries and archives destroyed or seriously damaged by acts of war, bombardment and fire, whether deliberate or accidental. No list has yet been drawn up of the holdings or collections already lost or endangered. The Library of Alexandria is probably the most famous historical example, but how many other known and unknown treasures have vanished in Constantinople, Warsaw, Florence, or more recently in Bucharest, Saint Petersburg and Sarajevo? Sadly the list cannot be closed. Within the framework of the Memory of the World Programme, H. van der Hoeven and J. van Albada attempted to list major disasters that have destroyed or caused irreparable damage during the 20th century to libraries and archives (Hoeven et al., 1996).

There are holdings dispersed following the accidental or deliberate displacement of archives and libraries. In the midst of armed struggle cultural heritage is liable to destruction. In isolated cases the records are actually the target of the conflict and are willfully annihilated, as is illustrated by the destruction of the Records Office in Bo, Sierra Leone. In this case aggrieved citizens swooped on the record office since it was government property and thus represented the enemy (Agebeye, 1999; Fröjd, 1997). On the other hand, archives are a good source of useful information for the aggressor. In this instance they are often accidentally damaged in an attempt to hit other targets (Haspel, 1992).

Ideally the world population should consist only of convinced pacifists. Sadly the cruel reality disturbs this dream and teaches otherwise. War cannot be stopped but at least some precautions to mitigate the detrimental consequences can be taken. Once again the building itself is the first line of defence. The location of the archive should be as far as possible from strategic sites and town centres (Haspel, 1992). Building underground is another possibility to protect the collection against the effects of war (Haspel, 1992; Ling, 1998; Duchein, 1988). There are some disadvantages on building underground. It is very expensive and flood is a serious hazard (see also section on Building – Underground Building). Institutions that have actually built their repositories underground include Tel Aviv University (Israel), National Archives of Norway (Norway) and Diet Library (Japan). When building aboveground the walls should be thick enough to withstand a serious bomb attack and be without windows. Gas and electricity lines should be as far as possible from the archival materials. The building should be equipped with good fire fighting facilities (Haspel, 1992).

Institutions safeguarding cultural heritage are also known to come under attack from terrorists. In some of its consequences terrorism resembles war and many precautions against war also hold true for terrorism. In this case security is of the utmost importance (see also sections below on Theft and Neglect and vandalism).

During the planning and construction of the new Public Record Office in London much attention was
paid to the security of the holdings. The intention was to prevent people gaining access at night and to prevent vehicles approaching the building too closely because of the possible threat of car bombs. A fence with only two entrances, one for cars and one for pedestrians encloses the site. Parking is not permitted within a specified distance to the office (Thomas, 1992).

Unfortunately the most recent terrorist attacks in the USA, the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11 2001, show that it is impossible to rule out a terrorist attack one hundred percent. Under these circumstances the FEMA has had to change the promise put forward in their fact sheet on terrorism that a terrorist attack in the USA remains possible, though is unlikely (FEMA website). The only way, it seems, to fight terrorism is to put much effort in taking precautionary measures.

Other preventive measures should be taken too. Inventories must be copied several times, for example on microfilm, and should be stored in different places, much as normal archival practice. The preparation of inventories that list priorities is very helpful, giving instructions on what to save first in case of danger. Many lessons can be learned from a retrieval operation after an incident. Identification and documentation of the collection are very important for recovery. Objects that are properly packed or boxed are safer.

In a possible conflict zone boxing is more urgent as it prevents damage to the objects if they are looted or evacuated. The objects might be marked, possibly with UV-markers (Ultraviolet). This has the advantage that in the first instance the text is invisible to the naked eye. Whether this is proper preservation practice or not remains to be seen (Norman, 2000). In the worst case the holdings should be evacuated to a safe and secure place (Fröjd et al., 1997).

Naturally the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) has many programmes to protect cultural heritage in time of armed conflict, since this was its initial task (see also section on International Cooperation – ICBS). The Blue Shield is an important component of a Risk Preparedness Scheme, a coherent plan of action for collaboration among various international and regional agencies and organisations. It tested models for risk preparedness and Blue Shield operations will be customised in each country to reflect national and local, legal or juridical, organisational and technical practices and differences as well as cultural values and possible risks peculiar to the nation or the locality (fCOMOS-ICBS website).

It is obvious what an armed conflict can do to repositories. The damage to the objects is not all direct, much being caused by the indirect results of the fighting. Buildings are often damaged leaving the holdings almost unprotected to unwanted intruders and to the weather. Also a lot of harm is done due to fire and water-related damage as a result of clashes (Fröjd et al., 1997).

It is of the utmost importance that experiences continue to be shared, no matter how sad they are. The Zemaljski Muzej in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck, Austria together organised a congress about catastrophes and catastrophe management in April 2001. 125 Participants from 17 nations shared their unfortunate experiences in catastrophic situations. What most had in common was the fact that they were insufficiently prepared to deal with catastrophes in their museums. The conclusion was that it is important to exchange experiences to avoid making similar mistakes (Mader, 2001). For some reason the consequences of the civil war for repositories in Nigeria in the 1960s appear to have been documented very well, see Bankole, 1969; Bowden, 1974; Ena, 1970; Obi, 1971; Oluwakayode, 1972. For further reading see Atkins, 1993; Dean, 1999c; ICA, 1996; Mukimbiri, 1996; Peic et al., 1999; Redmond-Cooper, 2000; Varkomoff et al., 2000.

6.4.3 Theft

Unfortunately, theft is a common threat to records. For the greater part the threat to collections in storage comes from internal theft, administrative loss and loss from external break-in. The staff, patrons or intruders may steal objects. Archival documents rarely attract thieves because of their financial value, nor because they contain confidential information. It is quite rare for documents to be stolen as a result of a break-in. When thefts do occur, they are usually carried out by readers of the reading rooms. In this respect, record offices should not be confused with museums (Duchein, 1988). Nonetheless, judging from the length of lists on book theft in the USA, theft is a popular occupation (Mason, 1975). The reason why not much is heard of these unfortunate events is that the managers and curators want to keep the name of the library in question out of the news. Book theft is simply not acknowledged. Part of this behaviour can be explained by the fear of contagion. Libraries are always nervous about revealing their vulnerability, but it is important to realise that book theft is a serious crime. Some stories are unbelievable and read like a real life thriller. Perhaps there is some wisdom in the inscription of a 13th century manuscript: ‘May he who steals you then be sent / A blow upon his fundament’ (see Reed, 1997).

The looting of collections by occupying forces is another consequence of war and terrorism. A side effect of warfare is the destruction of books used as fuel for cooking or as building material for recycling missing parts of historic buildings (Peic et al., 1999). In warfare the paper heritage is repeatedly reduced as available sources for fire, linings for damp floors, wrappings for market goods and even toilet paper (Rhys-Lewis, 1999).
Theft is not only a big problem for archives and libraries. Every day museum curators are offered stolen art and the illicit trade in non-western art especially is increasing hand over fist. As long as there is a ready market for illegal art in Europe and North America it is difficult for the developing countries to stop the theft of objects. In western countries a lot of money is spent on technical measures to protect the collection. But even if the government of a developing country can afford the most advanced security measures to prevent art from being taken out of the country, the attraction of easy money is likely to corrupt law enforcement agencies anyway. Only if public institutions refuse to buy illegal art will it be possible to stop illegal art dealing (Eyo, 1986).

Since 1997 the Object ID project has enabled museums and art-dealers to check whether an object is stolen or not before purchase. The goal of the programme is to realise an internationally accessible and efficient information system. An effective control system includes accurate documentation, identification and registration of stolen art. At the same time it is an international standard for describing cultural objects. It is promoted by major law enforcement agencies (FBI, Scotland Yard, Interpol), museums, cultural heritage institutions, art trade and art appraisal organisations, and insurance companies. In 1999 the Object ID project found a new home at the Council for the Prevention of Art Theft (CoPAT) (see Object ID website).

KIT Culture (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen), in the Netherlands runs a programme to introduce a digital registration system in museums in developing countries. The aim is to curb illegal trade in cultural heritage. It has developed a museum documentation system for use in museums in fourteen countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In each museum a computer is installed with specially developed Object Identification (ID) software and a digital camera, the so-called KIT Object ID kit. One press of a button can inform Interpol and custom authorities that an object is missing. In this way, information travels faster than the stolen object (KIT Culture website).

There are a number of databases published on the internet that register stolen art and books, like the private Art Loss Register (ARL), the Red List of ICOM that concentrates on the looting of archaeological objects of Africa, and Interpol (see Portes, 1996 and UNESCO, 1995). Most of these can also be reached through the websites of Object-ID and Museum-Security Network.

The precautions to curb theft are often called security measures. Security measures can be high-tech like surveillance cameras and electronic locks, or low-tech like limited access to stack areas, bars on windows, traditional locks and gates, human guards and staff surveillance (Bellardo, 1995). Controlled access for current users ensures the availability of records for future generations (Read, 1994). A weak point in maintaining any security system is the malcontents who may seek retribution through theft, destruction, or wilful mishandling of collections (Anonymous, 1999).

In addition to technical methods of protection archives should issue security regulations. To enforce the rules, reading rooms and the entrance should be supervised. A registration procedure for visitors and general rules of conduct should be part of the security regulations. Warning signs might help too and are usually a good reminder of the rules. Experience teaches that storage rooms should not be accessible for all staff and strict adherence to procedures on key sign-out and sign-in for locked areas is necessary for proper security (Duchein, 1988; Ling, 1998; Storey et al., 1989; Thomas, 1987; Trinkaus-Randall, 1995).

There are also rules on how an archivist should handle the case of patron theft (Totka, 1993). Guards play an important role in maintaining the security of archives, libraries and museums but guards are not fully trained in security duties in all countries. If they are semi-literate it is possible that they are unable to identify passes and identity cards (Baxi, 1974a). The presence of trained security personnel on-site has made a real difference in a number of libraries – it has even saved lives (Soete, 1999).

The design of the building can help to reduce the danger of crime. The reading rooms should be designed in such a way that it is possible for the staff to supervise the public (Ling, 1998; Duchein, 1988). It should be remembered that all security measures in the building design are only as secure as the quality of the materials and building techniques. For example a lock is worthless when the materials used to construct the door, cabinet or window to which they are attached, are of inferior quality (Dixon, 1999).

6.4.4 Neglect and vandalism

Neglect is mostly caused by carelessness or a shortage of money but it can also be done on purpose. It covers several topics: the maintenance of the building, the handling of the objects by staff and patrons, and the pursuing of rules by staff (see also sections on Building and Storage). Other forms of neglect concern objects related to minorities, collections that have been removed by occupying forces as trophies or collections that have been removed to safer storage (Hoeven et al., 1996). These objects should be returned to their rightful custodians (see also section on Preservation and Conservation – Preservation in Developing Countries – Artefacts From the Tropics). In the meantime they must receive the same treatment in the storage room as the other objects in the collection (Nieç, 1998).

Vandalism is frequently a sign of revenge (Hasan, 1974). This is confirmed by the report of a vandal who slashed a Dutch Old Master painting with a knife in the Dordrechts Museum in 1989. The hooligan was said to be unemployed and disgruntled with the fact that foreigners are employed in Holland (Talley, 1989).

The Darwin facility of the Australian National Archives severely suffered from vandalism until a fence was erected around the perimeter of the site (Ling, 1998). The area around the building should also be well lit. Trees and shrubs have the disadvantage that they can conceal people and can also be used to gain admittance to the building. Good fencing hinders trespassers and restricts unlawful transfer of property (Baxi, 1974a; Duchein, 1988; Ling, 1998; Teuling, 1994). Random patrols of the site in the silent hours by security personnel is advisable (Baxi, 1974a).

A survey of Indian museums from the early 1980s revealed that greater damage to objects was caused by neglect on the part of the curator than by any other agency (Agrawal, 1982b). Through proper training and education these problems could, at least partly, be prevented.

Most of the websites mentioned under War and Theft will have some information on neglect and vandalism.