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UK proposal to charge tourists to visit museums sparks backlash amid restitution demands

By Catarina Demony

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Summary

- UK considers charging foreign visitors to enter museums
- British museums hold contested artefacts from around the world
- Ghana says introducing fees raises issues of 'fairness'
- Restitution groups say exceptions should be considered

LONDON, April 16 (Reuters) - Britain is considering introducing entry fees for tourists visiting some of England's most renowned museums, a proposal that has drawn criticism from restitution groups and countries while disputed artefacts remain on display.

Free admission to Britain's national museums and galleries was introduced in 2001 by former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair in a bid to make culture more accessible to all.

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Last month, the UK government said it would work with the museum sector to explore the potential benefits of charging international visitors at national museums, including how this could support the arts sector. It would provide an update of the consultation before the end of the year, it said.

However, the proposal is facing backlash amid growing calls worldwide for artefacts to be [sent back to their communities](#) or countries of origin.

Although [some efforts](#) have been made to confront the long-standing issue, artefacts as well as [human remains](#) taken during the colonial era are still held in various museums across Europe. Some long-standing claims for artefacts involving the British Museum include Greece's Parthenon Sculptures, known as [Elgin marbles](#), and Nigeria's [Benin Bronzes](#).

The British Museum has previously said that the strength of its collection lies in enabling millions of visitors to understand the world's cultures and how they are interconnected.

ENTRY FEES ADD TO ONGOING INEQUALITIES

Ghana, which has [some of its regalia](#) and other artefacts in British institutions, said charging foreign visitors to view such objects raises issues of "fairness", particularly where restitution discussions remain ongoing, foreign minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa told Reuters.

The proposal, if implemented, would be "unethical", said Eric Phillips, vice chair of the Caribbean Community's reparations commission, a bloc of 15 member states including Jamaica and Barbados.

"Why should we have to pay to see our heritage?," Phillips said.

Arley Gill, chairman of Grenada's national reparations committee, said the priority should be to return the artefacts to their "rightful owners".

Open Restitution Africa (ORA) said Africans and others already face barriers to accessing artefacts taken from their countries and held in Western museums, including visa requirements and travel costs.

"Introducing entry fees further compounds these inequalities," ORA said.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-based non-profit Restitution Study Group said a fee exemption for such visitors would be a "meaningful gesture".

The government declined to comment on the criticism.

Reporting by Catarina Demony; Editing by Janane Venkatraman

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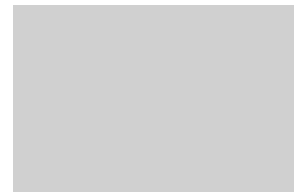
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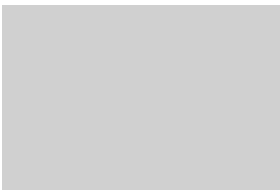
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