

Jerusalem , Bethlehem, 3.04.2011

Position of the Local Palestinian Christian community on Restrictions on Religious Rights (and especially during Holy Week)

For Christians, Holy Week in Jerusalem has a special spiritual connection. The Old City, its gates and roads, the Mount of Olives, Via Dolorosa and The Holy Sepulchre Church, where pilgrims from all over the world journey to, are equally important to the Palestinian Christians of Gaza and the West bank, who want to join their Jerusalemite Christian brethren in the liturgical events leading to the resurrection, the holiest celebration in Christianity.

In every country that respects and implements freedom of worship, worshippers of different faiths live their faith and express their prayers without restrictions from the governing authorities. In Jerusalem, and for the past decade, this has not been the case. The occupying power is denying free access to Holy places of worship to both Christians and Muslims on several important occasions.

Last year, Israel restrictions prevented Palestinian Christians from attending the Holy Fire Saturday in Jerusalem. Israel allows only 8000 pilgrims and few hundreds of locals to enter the city on Holy Fire Saturday where the Holy Sepulchre Church and its surroundings become off limits for Christians through a complex network of walls, checkpoints, and security apparatuses.

A tradition dating long before the creation of the state of Israel is observed by Palestinian Christians on that special day. Local Christians wait for The Holy Light on the roof of the Patriarchate and at the Church of Saint Jacob, adjoining the Holy Sepulchre. The local faithful insist on preserving this right no matter what it takes. They see that the restrictions made against them are violations of basic human rights and religious freedom as well as a violation of the Status Quo and centuries of religious traditions for the indigenous Christians of this land.

On the occasion of the celebration of Easter the “The Moment of Truth Document” that unites Christians in a word of Faith, Hope and Love in a call for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, would like to emphasize on the follow:

- The right of entry to Jerusalem for West Bank and Gaza Christians.
On the occasion of Easter, Palestinian Christians living outside of Jerusalem in the West Bank and Gaza are required to apply for permits to access their holy sites in occupied East Jerusalem. It is estimated that of those, only 2000 – 3000 Palestinian Christians receive permits. Muslims have also difficulties in accessing their Holy sites. However, Jews do not have to apply for permits!
- The permit system instated by Israel is in obvious violation of the ICPRR, Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international covenants and treaties to which Israel is a signatory. Regardless of the number of people from the local congregation allowed to

participate in the celebrations, we reject the imposition of a permit/quota system to access our churches and shrines.

- During Jewish holidays, Palestinian areas are put under military closure in the West bank and acquired permits are automatically cancelled.
- The heavy presence of Israeli Police and Military forces (around and in the Old City and surrounding the holy sites) preventing Christians from accessing the Holy Sepulcher Church and the Old City disturbs the spiritual atmosphere of Easter, especially when Israeli commanders are around and inside the Tomb of Christ.
- Excuses being used by the Israeli police regarding our 'own security' are not acceptable. In addition, our prayers and holding of candles are signs of peace & should not threaten the might of the Israeli Police. There is no need or justification for a fully charged army & police force.
- Actions taken against Palestinian Christians, the first and oldest Christian community in the world, attack not only the Palestinian people and their rights in the occupied city of Jerusalem, but in reality, the whole Christianity.

We call on all our leaders, friends, brothers and sisters around the world to continue exerting pressure on Israel, to end its military occupation on this land and to respect international law and human rights.

Practical steps to take:

** Support local Church leaders not to submit and accept the conditions that deprive indigenous and international worshippers of the joy of celebrating Easter.*

** Write to your political representatives to pressure Israel by political means to end its restrictions in this field*

** Write directly to the Israeli Ambassadors in your countries complaining against such actions*

**Kairos Palestine
The Christians Palestinian Initiative**