

Arab mayor's invite to papal audience withdrawn after Israeli protest

JERUSALEM - An invitation for the controversial mayor of an Arab-Israeli village to a papal audience in Vatican City was withdrawn following protests by the Israeli minister of tourism.

Mayor Mazen Ghanaim of Sakhnin confirmed April 23 that the invitation for the April 29 audience was canceled. He said he sent a letter of complaint to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a copy to Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman.

On April 22, newly appointed Israeli Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov issued a statement denouncing what he called "the planned meeting" as being in "complete contradiction" of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories May 11-15. The papal visit is part of a larger trip that includes a stop in Jordan May 8-11.

Misezhnikov, who heads the team in charge of making preparations for the pope's visit to Israel, said the trip is a "state-religious visit designed to promote peace and dialogue between peoples and religions."

He described Ghanaim as "a terror supporter and warmonger (who) acts against the national interests of the state in which he serves as mayor, and I call on the Holy See to abstain from meeting with him."

Misezhnikov is a member of Lieberman's right-wing party, Yisrael Beiteinu. The party, which means "Israel Is Our Home," has caused controversy for its blatant anti-Arab platform.

During the war in January between Israel and Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip, Ghanaim created a stir when he praised Palestinian "martyrs" and declared, "Long live Palestine, whose capital is Jerusalem," at an anti-war demonstration.

In a brief statement to the press, Archbishop Antonio Franco, papal representative to Israel and the Palestinian territories, said it was a “pity to make such a controversy” over the issue of a general audience with the pope and he regretted that Pope Benedict was dragged into the polemics.

A local Christian source told Catholic News Service that the Vatican also was miffed at Ghanaim’s claims that he had been invited to meet with the pope and discuss the status of Israeli Arabs prior to the papal visit.

“(Ghanaim) would have had the opportunity to shake the pope’s hand and at best exchange a few words with him,” said the source, adding that the papal audience had no connection to the pope’s pilgrimage.