

As papal visit nears, issues in Israel, Palestinian lands are unclear

JERUSALEM - Less than three weeks before Pope Benedict XVI's pilgrimage to Israel and the Palestinian territories, many issues remained unresolved.

It is unclear how much preparations for the trip will cost or who will foot what part of the bill, whether more than 200 Gaza Christians who have been promised permits to attend the pope's Masses will receive them, or even how many Christians live in the Holy Land, said Wadie Abunasser, head of the communications committee for the May 11-15 visit to Israel and the West Bank.

The papal visit is part of a larger trip that includes a stop in Jordan May 8-11.

In a press briefing April 21 in Jerusalem, Mr. Abunasser said the cost for the May 11-15 visit is being shared by the Israeli government and local Christians. Before the recent formation of the new government, Israel had earmarked more than \$10 million for infrastructure and other preparations; the local church also is raising funds for the visit, he said.

"The total (cost) is not clear," Mr. Abunasser said, noting that the local church is a tiny one. "We estimate it could reach a few million dollars. And there are fundraising efforts but we don't have an exact figure. Every day we have to add more - there are always budgetary surprises."

He said the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land had invested \$100,000 for preparation of the site for the pope's May 12 Mass in Jerusalem's Josafat Valley.

As to the number of Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territories, he said

statistics were not reliable because there is a lot of internal movement within the community. People leave the country but remain registered in their parishes, he added.

However, roughly speaking, he said, there are approximately 180,000 Christians in the area, with up to 70 percent of them belonging to various Catholic rites: Melkite, Armenian, Latin, Syrian, Chaldean and Coptic.

Mr. Abunasser said the local church has asked Israeli authorities to issue travel permits for up to 250 Gaza Christians, which would allow them to take part in one the pope's three public Masses: May 12 in Jerusalem, May 13 in Bethlehem, West Bank, or May 14 in Nazareth, Israel.

Mr. Abunasser reiterated that the prospect of the pope visiting the Gaza Strip had been studied very carefully, but it was determined that for security and logistical reasons a visit would not be possible at this time. However, he said, the pope will meet specifically with a group of Christians from Gaza at the Palestinian Authority's presidential palace in Bethlehem.

"We are dedicating a special place for Gazans to meet the Holy Father," Mr. Abunasser said.

He said the travel permits that Israel normally issues to West Bank Christians for the Easter holiday were extended until the end of the pope's visit, and he expects about 11,000 West Bank Christians to have permits for the visit.

"It is not a secret that sometimes we have obstacles with the Israelis for travel or to get permits, but there are some signals, and I do believe there will be better cooperation," he said. "We can't guarantee that everything will be as we want it, but I do hope that our faithful will have more freedom of movement."

Mr. Abunasser also presented the visit's official poster, which includes writing in English, Arabic and Hebrew. The official logo shows Jesus appointing Peter as his successor. There are also photographs of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth.

Although the papal visit is intended to "encourage and reaffirm" the strong ties between the local church and the Vatican and to promote interreligious relations, Mr. Abunasser said he hoped it also will promote a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"The situation is complicated in our part of the world. There is a new government in Israel, and it is not clear what the future of the region is - with Iran and the situation in Iraq not settled, and there are upcoming elections in Lebanon. We are living in boiling water," Mr. Abunasser said. "But we are people of faith and we believe in prayer.

"Maybe the Holy Father will succeed where others have failed. We don't have any illusions that ... the day after the pope leaves there will be a signed peace agreement. But maybe people will be more willing to try other ways," he said.