

Bishops say situation not good in Holy Land

JERUSALEM - English and Canadian bishops visiting the Holy Land said they see possibilities for change in light of recent peace initiatives, but Palestinians and Israelis still are not in a good situation.

"It is a very delicate moment. There is this possibility of things happening while at the same time we are aware that on the ground there are some very serious problems; we see the security wall and the settlements," said Archbishop Patrick Kelly of Liverpool, vice president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

Archbishop Kelly was a participant in the ninth annual meeting of the Coordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church in the Holy Land, a Catholic group, Jan. 11-16. Participants met in the Holy Land through Jan. 15, then were scheduled to travel to Rome to meet with Vatican officials.

Auxiliary Bishop William Kenney of Birmingham, England, said that although there seemed to be slightly more hope than during his eight previous visits for the meeting, his experience with the region has taught him to "be careful." He added that "in a situation of very little hope you grasp (at anything)."

The difficulty lies in Israel's reluctance to reduce the buildup of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territory, said Archbishop V. James Weisgerber of Winnipeg, Manitoba, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"That is not a gesture of good faith," he said, adding that as a first-time participant in the conference he was "very surprised at the control of movement" the Israelis had on the life of Palestinians.

Meeting with local Christians at Holy Redeemer Parish in Taybeh, West Bank, and seeing how the Eucharist was lived was "extraordinary," said Archbishop Weisgerber, although he said Christians were concerned about emigration due to economic difficulties.

He said students at Bethlehem University spoke about going abroad to complete their studies and find jobs, although some said they would like to return afterward.

“If the economic situation gets better most people would return. For graduates there are no jobs here,” said Bishop Kenney. He said that because of travel restrictions and checkpoints some Bethlehem residents have been unable to leave the West Bank town for years.

Archbishop Kelly said upon his return to England he would begin the process of educating Catholics, raising their awareness of the situation in the Holy Land.

“We will explain to people what the settlements are, what it means if you are traveling within Palestinian territory if you have to go through checkpoints controlled by another country. I can’t imagine that in England,” he said.

At the same time, he said, he would speak of the “deep feeling of fear in the Jewish people rooted in the Holocaust, which can’t go away for many decades.” In addition, Israelis fear missile attacks from Islamic extremists in Gaza and at the Lebanese border in the north, he said.

“Fear is not a good place to start from,” said Archbishop Kelly. “Violence is violence, and it is simply not tolerable.”

Bishop Kenney said he would continue with his program of the “three P’s”: prayer, pilgrimage and persuasion.

Prayer, his first priority, would create an atmosphere of unity between Christians in England and Christians in the Holy Land, he said, while coming on a pilgrimage and using Palestinian services would provide a much-needed boost to the local economy. To persuade, he said, he would talk to Palestinian and Israeli representatives in England.

“It does not take the place of politics, but it makes all people aware that we are watching what they are doing, and that has an effect on people when they know that people with access to a large constituency are watching,” said Bishop Kenney. “There is no way we will accept calling the (separation) wall a fence; we have been here often enough. ... And it is hard for the Palestinians to be purely victims.”

The Palestinians also “have to get their act together” internally, he said, referring to a split between the Palestinian factions of Fatah, which controls the West Bank, and Hamas, an Islamic extremist movement that controls the Gaza Strip.