

CRS leader says progress made at peace conference

An official from Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services called the recently concluded Annapolis peace conference a “very positive first step” toward achieving peace in the Middle East. But she warned that the next year will be “very volatile,” requiring a commitment on all sides to see the process through no matter what setbacks may come.

President George W. Bush announced Nov. 27 in Annapolis that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas reached a “joint understanding” to continue negotiations and establish a peace plan by the end of 2008.

“The summit didn’t create peace,” said Christine Tucker, CRS regional director for the Mid-Atlantic and the former regional director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“What the summit did was put us on the path to peace,” she said. “Peace would not be created without the summit.”

While negotiators hammer out the sticky questions involving a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinian territories, Ms. Tucker said it’s important for Israelis and Palestinians to agree to some early “confidence-building steps.”

Israelis could ease restrictions on travel, stop building a security wall and halt the expansion of settlements in Palestinian territories, Ms. Tucker said. Palestinian leaders, in turn, could speak out more forcefully about the right of Israel to exist while also denouncing acts of terrorism, she said.

“These are small measures that would go a long way toward establishing trust,” said Ms. Tucker, a parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville. “The people need to see that there are some steps being taken now to ease the crisis – not a year from now.”

Ms. Tucker said the travel restrictions imposed on Palestinians by Israel are contributing to a “severe humanitarian crisis.” Palestinians do not have easy access to health care, education or jobs, she said. The restrictions also make it difficult for CRS to operate its relief efforts in the Palestinian territories, she said.

While most of the work of CRS is focused on humanitarian efforts in the region, the agency also runs several programs to build up civil society to prepare Palestinians for the day when they will have their own nation side-by-side with Israel. Some of those programs include helping young people understand democracy by holding elections in schools, sponsoring cultural activities, visiting historic sites and connecting high school students with their counterparts in the United States via the Internet.

“Building bridges has been very difficult,” said Ms. Tucker.

Ms. Tucker said there are “a lot of people in the region who don’t want peace” and that there will likely be efforts to thwart the peace process. But most people in the region want to live in harmony, she said.

“We need to get the message out that this process is going to work if we support the legitimate claims of both sides as equal partners,” she said.

Ms. Tucker said it will be important for the Bush administration to stay engaged in the process. She encouraged citizens to voice their support for the peace process to the president and their lawmakers.

“We need to vocally support both the Palestinians and the Israelis to keep the negotiations going,” she said.