

Israeli president, pope meet, express hopes for Middle East peace deal

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy - As the first direct peace talks in two years between Israeli and Palestinian leaders were launched in the United States, Pope Benedict XVI and Israeli President Shimon Peres met in a private audience.

The two leaders expressed hopes that the renewal of direct talks in Washington would contribute to the "reaching of an agreement that is respectful of the legitimate aspirations of the two peoples and capable of bringing lasting peace to the Holy Land and the entire region," the Vatican said.

The closed-door, 40-minute papal audience at the papal summer residence Sept. 2 was "cordial," the Vatican said in a written statement.

Peres also met privately for 30 minutes with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's secretary of state, and Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, secretary for relations with states.

"The condemnation of all forms of violence and the necessity of guaranteeing better conditions of life to all the peoples of the area were reaffirmed" during the meetings, the Vatican statement said.

Discussions also included the role of interreligious dialogue and "an overview of the international situation," it said.

Church-related issues such as an "examination of the relations between the state of Israel and the Holy See and those of the state authorities with the local Catholic communities" were also discussed, the Vatican statement said.

Emphasis was placed on the very special significance of the presence of these communities in the Holy Land and the contribution that they offer for the common good of society, also through Catholic schools, it said.

The Vatican statement said the results of a Vatican-Israeli bilateral working commission were looked at and hopes were expressed that the commission's work could soon be concluded.

The commission, established in 1993, has been working on and off for years to settle agreements related to the tax situation of Catholic institutions in Israel and other primarily fiscal issues.

The issuing of visas is also a major point of contention. Israel has often turned down church requests for multiple-entry visas for priests and religious from Arab countries who work in Israel and the Palestinian territories, which hinders their ability to carry out their pastoral work and prevents them from being able to visit their families.

According to a written statement released Sept. 1 by the presidential spokesperson, Peres wanted to ask the pope for assistance in the return of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who was kidnapped from the Gaza border four years ago and believed held in the Gaza Strip.

Peres also wished to express concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions and the potential impact a nuclear weapons arsenal in Iran would have on the Middle East, the statement said. Israel already has nuclear weapons.

Details about the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians as well, as how to strengthen relations between Israel and the Vatican, were other talking points Peres intended to discuss with the pope, it said.

At the end of the papal audience, Peres gave the pope a silver menorah made by an Israeli artist.

Peres had the following personal dedication inscribed on the foot-tall menorah: "To his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, the shepherd who seeks to lead us to the fields of blessings and the fields of peace. With great esteem, Shimon Peres, president of the State of Israel."

Peres' papal audience came the same day that the United States hosted meetings between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President

Mahmoud Abbas.

U.S. President Barack Obama inaugurated the new peace process with a White House dinner Sept. 1 attended by Netanyahu, Abbas, Jordan King Abdullah and Egypt President Hosni Mubarak.

The same day, Palestinian gunmen attacked and wounded two Israelis in the West Bank, and four Jewish settlers who had been killed in the West Bank by Hamas militants were buried.

A major stumbling block in negotiations was expected to be the construction of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. A 10-month moratorium on settlement construction in the West Bank was to expire Sept. 26, and Israeli officials have said it is unlikely to be extended despite demands by the Palestinian authorities to extend it and to halt construction plans in East Jerusalem.

Israel has occupied the West Bank and East Jerusalem since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.