

Pope meets Israeli president

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy - Pope Benedict XVI met with Israeli President Shimon Peres and expressed hope that new diplomatic moves can bring peace in the Middle East.

After 60 years of suffering endured by the peoples of the region, it is imperative to make "every effort" to find a just settlement, the Vatican said after the Sept. 6 meeting.

Following his 35-minute private audience with the pope, Peres held separate talks with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's top foreign affairs official, to discuss the Middle East and church-state relations in Israel.

The encounters came as Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert were preparing to renew negotiations. Meanwhile, diplomats were setting the stage for a U.S.-sponsored international conference on the Middle East in November.

The Vatican statement said the prospect of an international conference raised new hopes and created a "particularly favorable context" for progress.

"All sides should make every effort to respond to the expectations of the populations, which have been exhausted by a crisis that has lasted 60 years and that continues to spread grief and destruction," the statement said.

Any eventual Israeli-Palestinian agreement should respect U.N. resolutions and previously concluded agreements, the Vatican said.

Peres renewed Israel's invitation to Pope Benedict to visit Israel and the Holy Land. Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, said the pope is open to such a trip, but that the timing would depend on circumstances. Vatican sources say no such visit is being contemplated at present.

On the subject of church-state relations, the Vatican statement expressed the hope for the "rapid conclusion" of current negotiations on the financial and legal status of church institutions in Israel. Vatican and Israeli representatives met in Jerusalem in early September to discuss the issues and are expected to meet again this fall.

Peres, who met the pope at the papal summer villa outside Rome, gave the pontiff an unusual gift: a modern work of art titled "Virtual Prayer for Reconciliation and Peace" by Israeli artist Yaacov Agam. The piece, made of colored and

semitransparent material, incorporated the symbols of the three monotheistic religions: the Star of David for Judaism, the cross for Christianity and the crescent moon for Islam.

Later the same morning, the pope met with the Saudi Arabian foreign minister, Prince Saud Al Faisal, in talks that focused in part on conflict in the Middle East. The Vatican said the 20-minute meeting also touched on moral and religious values, the political and religious situation in Saudi Arabia, and the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

A day earlier, the pope held talks with Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa. Their discussions covered the Middle East and, in particular, the massive influx of Iraqi refugees in Syria.