

Source: Israel, Vatican eager to finalize talks before papal visit

JERUSALEM - Israeli and Vatican negotiators appear eager to finalize negotiations on fiscal and property matters prior to the pope's visit to the Holy Land, a source close to the negotiations said.

"Both the state of Israel and the representatives of the Holy See are very interested to finalize this," he said, adding that though he was unaware of any official policy, the pope's visit, reportedly in May, might be acting as an impetus for both sides to finish up negotiations.

In a statement following a plenary session at the Vatican Dec. 18, the negotiators said they have scheduled another plenary session for April 23 and four meetings of their working group which will take place starting in January with "the intent on both sides of accelerating the process and reaching an agreement as soon as possible."

The statement called the December meeting "significant and useful."

"Everybody is tired," said the source, who wished to remain anonymous. "The visit by the pope may be the time to finalize it."

Archbishop Antonio Franco, the Vatican nuncio to Israel and the Palestinian territories, could not be reached for comment.

The ongoing negotiations to safeguard the fiscal status of the church in Israel and to protect holy places and other church properties have lasted for almost 15 years since the signing of the Fundamental Agreement in 1993. Full diplomatic relations were established in 1994 and three years later the parties signed an agreement that permitted the Catholic Church autonomy to run its own internal affairs, subject to Israeli laws. They now are trying to reach an agreement settling questions regarding the tax status and other financial questions related to Catholic institutions in Israel.

From the beginning of the negotiations in 1994, Vatican officials have asked Israel

to:

- Guarantee Catholic access to juridical due process through the Israeli court system when property disputes arise. Israel's position has been that church property disputes are matters to be handled by the government, not the courts.
- Formally extend the exemption from taxation enjoyed by church properties and institutions before Israeli statehood.
- Return confiscated church properties. The most discussed property has been the site of a church shrine, destroyed in the 1950s, in Caesarea.