

# Tourism to Holy Land promoted as a way to bring peace to Middle East

JERUSALEM - Pilgrimage to the Holy Land can become a bridge to peace, said an Israeli tourism official, noting the positive effect the spring pilgrimage of Pope Benedict XVI had on creating cooperation between Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli officials.

"There are many disputes in the Holy Land but something we don't have disputes about is when it comes to pilgrims," Rafi Ben Hur, deputy director general of the Israeli Tourist Ministry, said during a Dec. 16 press conference.

He said Israeli and Palestinian tourism officials have been working together to promote the region as a pilgrimage destination. There also has been cooperation with Jordanian tourism officials, he said.

"We are putting our first priority on pilgrimage; pilgrimage in particular is a bridge to peace," he said, citing how the Holy Land visit of Pope Benedict XVI in May created "tremendous" cooperation between Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian tourism officials. The papal visit has helped attract pilgrims despite the worldwide economic slump, he said.

Israel also was endorsing Bethlehem as an important part of the pilgrimage experience with tour operators abroad, he explained.

"Here is an opportunity to show that it is safe (to go to Bethlehem) and this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity should be taken," he said.

Israeli Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov saw Christian religious leaders not only as "real friends" in the endeavor to promote the Holy Land as a pilgrimage site, but as "real partners in creating bonds with Israel and her neighbors."

"Tourism and pilgrimage can be a real uniting force through joint economic interests and job creation," he said

The year 2009 was another peak year in tourism with nearly 3 million visitors expected to make the trip to Israel by the end of the year. Mizezhnikov said about a third of them also have visited Bethlehem.

“A peak year in Israel also translates into a peace year in the Palestinian Authority,” Mizezhnikov said.

Israeli tourism officials expect some 70,000 visitors during the Christmas holiday.

With the improving economic and security situation Civil Administration Bethlehem DCO Commander Lt. Col. Eyad Sirhan said he expects that travel permits over the monthlong Christmas holiday season would be given to all Palestinian Christians who request them as long as they meet security requirements.

Israel also was considering giving permits to 100 Christians from Gaza. Christian citizens of Israel will be able to cross freely into Bethlehem during that period, he said.

“There is a clear indication of improving economic and security conditions in the West Bank and that makes it easier to ease restrictions,” he said.

He said soldiers and police officers who will be staffing the border crossings into Bethlehem during Christmas will receive daily briefings explaining the significance of the holiday and the correct procedure for allowing pilgrims, religious leaders and local Israeli and Palestinian Christians to cross the borders easily.