

Vatican-Israeli commission meets, reschedules meeting on finances

JERUSALEM - A planned April 8 meeting of the bilateral permanent working commission between Israel and the Vatican convened only briefly prior to the Jewish Passover holiday.

The meeting on fiscal matters was rescheduled for April 23, and the plenary meeting which was to take place that day was pushed back to April 30.

Archbishop Antonio Franco, papal representative to Israel and the Palestinian territories, said the short meeting was understandable given the recent installation of a new Israeli government.

"There are new government ministers and not all of them have had the opportunity to inform themselves of the issues," he said. "This is something which can be understood. These are normal things that happen with a change of government."

He said the two sides "exchanged considerations and issues," but did not proceed with the meeting or release a statement.

He said the talks were complex and negotiators never had illusions that an accord could be signed before Pope Benedict XVI's May 8-15 visit to the Holy Land. However, he said, "major steps forward" will be taken before the visit.

"We are working honestly in good faith," said Archbishop Franco.

The two sides currently are trying to reach an agreement settling questions regarding the tax status and other financial questions related to Catholic institutions in Israel.

The Vatican and Israel signed the Fundamental Agreement in 1993, opening the way to full diplomatic relations in 1994. Three years later the two parties signed an agreement that permitted the Catholic Church in Israel autonomy to run its own internal affairs, subject to Israeli law.