

Pope worried by conflict at settlement in Jerusalem

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Christian rights in Jerusalem must be respected in any resolution of the controversy over Jewish settlers in the city's Christian Quarter, Pope John Paul II said April 29.

The pope said he sympathized with the decision of Christian leaders to temporarily close the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other Christian shrines to protest the Jewish occupation of a building in the Greek Orthodox-owned St. John's Hospice complex.

The pope's remarks came one day after Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem said the settlement was part of a plan to take over a large part of the Christian sector. The patriarch said such a plan would endanger the continued presence of Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem.

The "grave incidents" in Jerusalem leading to the "painful decision" to close the religious sites "are even for me cause for suffering and deep worry," the pope said.

"Let us pray so that everyone has the heart to seek solutions inspired in justice and respect for rights," he added.

The pope prayed for peace in Jerusalem which is "holy" and "dear" to Christians, Jews and Muslims.

The Vatican wants international guarantees that would safeguard Jerusalem's status as a holy city open to Christians, Jews and Muslims.

Christian leaders in the Holy Land closed all Christian sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth April 27 to protest the continued presence of 150 Jewish settlers in a building owned by the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Israeli Supreme Court ruled April 26 that the settlers must evacuate the



File photo

Although demonstrations in Jerusalem called for 1990 to be a "year of peace," disputes between Jews and Christians threaten religious relations.

building. But it said the Panamanian company through which the lease was arranged could keep 20 representatives at the site until the courts rule on the legality of the lease.

Holy Sepulchre is one of Christianity's most important shrines, built over the spots where Christ was crucified and buried.

Patriarch Sabbah and other Christian leaders protested the financing of the settlers by the Israeli government. He said the Jewish settlement was part of a plan to

control a large part of the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem and put "in danger the future of the non-Jewish population."

He also criticized the Israeli government for refusing to enter peace talks with Palestinian leaders. The patriarch said peace is the "only guarantee for the future of the Hebrew people."

The settlers moved into the complex during Holy Week. The move was based on a controversial multi-million-dollar sublease agreement with the tenants. Christian-led

protest demonstrations were broken up by Israeli police using tear gas.

The Israeli government contributed \$1.8 million toward the cost to the settlers of subleasing.

Patriarch Sabbah, a Palestinian, discussed the current turmoil in Israel in April 28 interviews from Jerusalem with Vatican Radio and *Avvenire*, Italian Catholic newspaper.

The situation "is not a banal dispute between owner and tenant," he said.

The settlers represent a radical faction in Judaism which "would like to take control of the entire city," he added.

Their presence in the Orthodox-owned complex "is a violation of the 'status quo,'" and they are "strongly supported by the government," the patriarch said.

But Israel has "two faces" and there is "a moderate Jewish religious movement." Its leaders expressed solidarity with Christians and "condemned the settlers," he said.

"It seems to me, though, that the other face of Israel, an aggressive one, is emerging," said the patriarch.

The one-day closing of the Christian shrines was an effort to draw the attention of the world's Christians and of Western political leaders to the situation, he said.

"This part of Jerusalem represents Christianity. We told our brothers around

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