

Patriarch says pressure on Israel builds trust in talks

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

ROME — Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem said recent U.S. pressure on Israel to curtail settlements in the occupied territories may help build more trust in the current peace talks.

The patriarch, in an interview Feb. 27 in Rome, said the Jewish settlements were a major obstacle to a peace agreement.

"The object of the peace talks is the Palestinian and Palestinian land, and when you want to talk about a land that you want to give back to its

owners, you cannot use it in the meantime and fill it with other people," Patriarch Sabbah said.

"This is a major issue for the Palestinians — either they have their land or they don't," he said.

The patriarch said the United States has done well to emphasize this and other substantial issues to peace-talk participants.

On Feb. 24, Secretary of State James Baker said publicly for the first time that the United States would not grant \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel unless the Israeli government agreed to freeze construction of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. The

loans were arranged to help Soviet immigrants to Israel. The governing party protested the announcement.

Meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators sat down in Washington for a fourth round of the U.S.-sponsored peace talks. An Israeli offer of limited self-rule for Palestinians was dismissed by the Palestinian delegation, which said the proposals were designed to perpetuate Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Patriarch Sabbah said lack of concrete progress in the talks so far, coupled with ongoing violence in the region, has left many Palestinians un-

convinced that an agreement can be found.

"Having initiated the peace conference, both sides are still going the way of violence. This says, 'OK, we talk but we don't trust,'" he said.

"They seem to be talking pro forma," he said. "We hope they will go to the substance."

Patriarch Sabbah said the climate for the peace talks has been hurt by Israel's recent strikes on Palestinian refugee camps in southern Lebanon, followed by an exchange of rocket attacks. The Israeli action came in retaliation to the slaying of three Israeli soldiers in Israel.

Billy Graham

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