

Leaders work to get Mideast talks on track

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

JERUSALEM — From the Vatican to the Middle East, church and political leaders worked in mid-March to get Israeli-Palestine Liberation Organization peace negotiations back on track after months of delay and disappointment.

In public statements and quiet diplomacy, the church tried to pressure both sides to return to the bargaining table.

The sense of urgency was illustrated by Jerusalem's Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah, who said he was afraid that if this "last chance" for peace were lost, the region would be "drowned in violence forever."

At the Vatican, Pope John Paul II and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin met on short notice March 17 and agreed that everything must be done to unblock the peace talks, despite "regrettable incidents" and the efforts of hard-line opponents of dialogue.

The same day, Vatican diplomatic gears were also turning in Tunisia, where shuttle envoy Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran met with PLO chairman Yasser Arafat to see what can be done to get the PLO and Israel talking again.

As leaders were trying to restart the peace process, resentment and frustration were building among the people of the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza. The PLO broke off participation in the peace talks after a Jewish settler massacred 30 Muslims at a mosque in Hebron Feb. 25, provoking widespread civil disturbances and a clampdown by occupation authorities.

Palestinian Catholics joined others in denouncing the Israeli-enforced curfews and travel restrictions that virtually shut down the West Bank economy and left people unable to reach jobs or schools.

"Instead of imposing restrictions on the aggressor, they are imposing them on the victims themselves," Patriarch Sabbah said in an interview March 16. He has said the mosque massacre illus-



Pope John Paul II shakes hands with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin during their March 17 meeting at the Vatican. Rabin asked for the pope's support to get the peace process 'back on track.'

AP/Wide World Photos

trates the need for some form of international protection in the territories.

Melkite Archbishop Loufi Laham, a patriarchal bishop of Jerusalem, said Israel should begin moving settlers out of the West Bank if it wants to restore trust in the peace process.

"These settlements are artificial. To put them there to dominate the Arab population, to reduce the Arab (living) space — this is not right," he said in an interview March 19.

The PLO has demanded that Israel disarm and evacuate the settlers from the West Bank and post international observers. Israel has taken steps to curb some extremists among the settlers, but that has not satisfied PLO leaders.

Rabin, who spoke privately with Pope

John Paul after meeting with U.S. officials earlier in the week, said he did not foresee a direct mediation role for the pope. But he said he hoped the pontiff's "moral and spiritual leadership" could generate more urgency for the negotiations.

A Vatican spokesman confirmed after the meeting that "the main topic was to try to boost the role of the Holy See in the peace process."

In Jerusalem, an Israeli foreign ministry official, Eitan Margalit, said Israel hoped papal encouragement could help bring about "the first step, which should be to resume the talks and end the boycott" by the PLO.

At the time of the pope-Rabin meeting, Archbishop Tauran, an assistant secretary of state, was meeting almost simultaneously with Arafat at PLO headquar-

ters in Tunis. The Vatican said the archbishop's trip aimed to underline that the peace process is an "irreversible reality."

After the meeting, the prelate said he had discussed the importance of re-opening the PLO-Israeli dialogue, but made clear the Holy See was not playing any mediation role, according to Middle Eastern news agencies.

The dispatch of a top Vatican official to PLO headquarters gave the Holy See a chance to demonstrate that it is taking a balanced approach to questions surrounding the peace talks, a PLO source in Jerusalem said.

In recent months, the Vatican has begun formal talks in Rome and Jerusalem with PLO officials. Both sides have described these meetings as cordial, pre-

liminary efforts to set an agenda and build a relationship.

Claudette Habesch, one of three PLO-appointed representatives in the Jerusalem talks and the head of the Jerusalem Caritas office, said the morale of Palestinians — Christians and non-Christians — was at a low point.

She said there was euphoria last fall after the signing of the Israeli-PLO "Declaration of Principles," which called for the phasing in of limited Palestinian autonomy beginning in December.

But as the delay in implementation has dragged on, people have lost faith in the agreement, she said.

Patriarch Sabbah offered a similar reading of the local mood.

"Any credibility in the peace talks was lost. It's up to the leaders — the Palestinians and the Israelis — to restore this credibility," he said. People will begin to hope again when they see concrete steps toward justice, he said.

Israel's new special representative to the Vatican, Samuel Hadas, said he thought the peace talks could make rapid progress once both sides return to the negotiating table.

In an interview in Jerusalem March 13, Hadas condemned the Hebron massacre and said Israel was taking steps to prevent similar attacks. He said religious leaders can help calm the volatile situation in the wake of the killings.

"We need people with spiritual influence to try to defuse the religious dimension of this tragedy" and to "try to prevent people from committing murderous crimes in the name of religion," he said.

Comparing the Hebron massacre to the recent bombing of a Christian church in Lebanon, Hadas added: "We have to stop these people, whether they are Jews, Muslims or Christians."

EDITORS' NOTE: John Thavis, Vatican editor in the Catholic News Service Rome bureau, was on a weeklong reporting trip to Jerusalem in mid-March.

Rebels seek constitutional support for poor

By Mike Tangeman
Catholic News Service

MEXICO CITY — The Mexican government has reacted quickly to demands by insurgents in the southern state of Chiapas for electoral reform.

But it appears to be balking over other rebel demands for constitutional guarantees of land and cultural liberty for indigenous people and peasant farmers nationwide. Organizations representing such groups across the country have allied themselves with those demands.

The administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has responded to the Zapatista National Liberation Army call for greater clean elections by convening a special congressional session to reform the federal electoral law.

Leaders of the surprise rebellion by some 2,000 mostly Indian Zapatistas had questioned whether the upcoming August presidential and congressional vote would be legitimate if the country's much-criticized electoral law were not reformed.

With political opponents having judged previous electoral reforms insufficient, in recent weeks Interior Secretary Jorge Carpizo has tried to get the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party and opposition parties to reach a consensus over a new reform package designed to dispel doubts about vote fraud.

The legislation could give the country its first truly fair elections in seven decades, according to observers.

But many, including Father Jose

Manuel Jara, director of the church-linked National Center for Support to Indigenous Missions, say better voting legislation is merely one aspect of what the Zapatistas and a growing number of indigenous and campesino peasant farmers nationwide really want. These groups seek constitutional protection for their cultural identities and from encroachment on their lands by outsiders, he said.

Father Jara said the Chiapas rebellion is symptomatic of a much broader discontent in Mexico's countryside which has resulted from a 1992 reform of Article 27 of the constitution, which was pushed by the Salinas administration.

There has been widespread support for a second Zapatista demand for constitutional guarantee of "political, economic and cultural autonomy" for the estimated 8 million indigenous people nationwide.

The controversial amendment of Article 27 was designed to open up Mexico's long-protected agricultural sector to private investors in anticipation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. It decrees the end of Mexico's agrarian reform program and allows individuals within farming communities for the first time to sell their share of community land to outside private investors.

Virtually unchangeable without a renegotiation of the agricultural provisions of NAFTA, the amendment's repeal has become a cause championed by the Zapatistas and widely supported by indigenous and campesino groups.

During his dialogue in Chiapas in late

February with the Zapatista leadership, government peace envoy Manuel Camacho Solis responded to the demands with an offer to enact a new "General Law on the Rights of Indigenous Communities."

Although it promises protection of indigenous culture and lands, opponents say the law would lack constitutional stature, apparently skirt — except in Chiapas — the question of autonomy for indigenous groups nationwide, and leave intact the ban on further land redistribution.

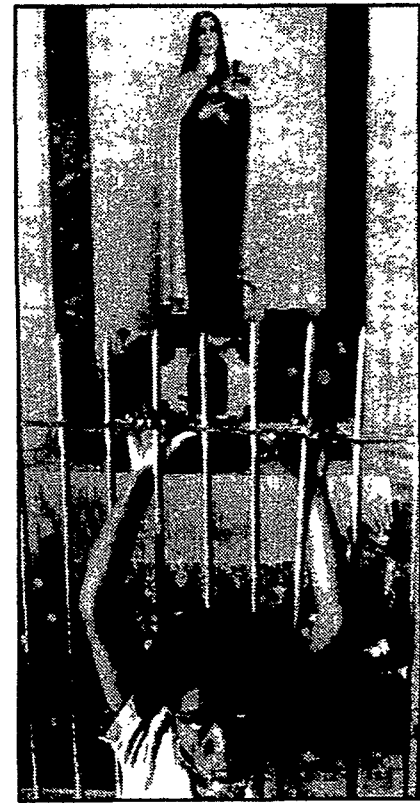
According to Father Jara, it was Article 27's promise of agrarian reform in the wake of Mexico's 1910-17 revolution which gave the country's Indians the hope of reclaiming at least part of the ancestral lands taken from them over the centuries.

"These people are living in their own territory, but through legal loopholes, through fraud, through a variety of mechanisms their lands have been taken from them," he said.

The amendment stole from indigenous communities their "only hope for recovering their territory," he said.

The constitutional modification further holds out what Father Jara said was the "temptation of quick cash" for impoverished farmers forced to sell their lands out of sheer necessity.

For Indian communities, where land is tied to cultural identity, he said he agrees with the Zapatista claim that the loss of lands holds the threat of cultural extinction.



AP/Wide World Photos

On the fence

A young girl hangs onto the fence guarding a statue of the Virgin Mary inside the Sacre-Coeur Roman Catholic Church in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, on March 13. Antoine Izmerly, a businessman who supported ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was pulled from his pew at the church and assassinated last September.