

WORLD & NATION

Israeli ambassador says mosque best compromise

ROME (CNS) — Israel's ambassador to the Vatican rejected a Vatican accusation that his government was stirring up religious antagonisms by its approval of a new mosque next to a major Christian shrine.

Ambassador Aharon Lopez said the Israeli government had effectively defused Christian-Muslim tensions by allowing a smaller mosque to be built adjacent to the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. He said the whole episode was being "overdramatized."

"If there was any purpose in the government decision, it was the opposite of fomenting division," Lopez said Nov. 26 in a meeting with reporters in his Rome office.

The term "fomenting divisions" was used two days earlier by Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls when he criticized Israel for allowing the mosque to be built.

But Lopez said Israeli authorities were concerned about removing a group of militant Muslims from a square around the basilica and restoring a climate of harmony.

In the end, neither side got what it wanted, but it still may turn out to have been the best decision, the ambassador said.

"The compromise was certainly much better than using force. It allowed the government to clear the square and heal rifts," he said. By clearing away the Muslim protesters, he said, the government had removed an "element of provocation to Christians" at one of its holiest places.

"I'm sure this will help create an atmosphere of welcome for the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who will come to Nazareth during the jubilee, including 'Pilgrim No. 1,' His Holiness Pope John Paul II," he said.

The pope wants to travel to Nazareth during a planned visit to the Holy Land in March, but the Vatican has hinted that the mosque controversy could alter the papal travel plans.

Lopez refused direct comment on the Vatican's bluntly worded statement, but he said there was "no justification for creating such a dramatization of the situation." He said the government was disappointed but not completely surprised at the negative Christian reaction to the Israeli solution.

He pointed out that, although the cornerstone for the mosque was laid Nov. 24, construction would not begin until after the year 2000. He said Israel would insist that the mosque be built according to the terms of the compromise plan, which effectively isolates the mosque entrance from the basilica and the surrounding square.

In Jerusalem, a spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry said construction of the mosque would need to follow the normal procedure in Israel, which includes presenting plans that meet construction standards to the district planning committee.

In this specific case, said spokesman Ariel Kenet, the plans will also need to be approved by a committee of international experts, including a Christian expert, to see if the building fits the overall character of the area. The whole process should take between 18 months and two years, he said.

Kenet said the current situation between Israel and the Vatican was tense and there were "difficulties" that probably would continue until "things are cleared up completely."

He added that Israel and the Vatican should have the right to issue statements detailing their positions without it being considered deterioration in relations or a conflict.



Reuters/CNS

Basilica reopens

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano blesses the altar of the restored Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy, Nov. 28. The church was reopened to the public with an official ceremony two years after earthquakes brought down part of the ceiling.

Abortion protest case finally closed

NEW YORK (CNS) — The U.S. government will not appeal a federal court ruling upholding a judge's decision to throw out criminal contempt of court charges against a retired Catholic bishop and a priest.

The government's decision brings to a close a 4½-year-old court case involving retired Bishop George E. Lynch, 82, and Brother Fidelis Moscinski, 30, and their challenge to the federal Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act.

The two said they were pleased with the outcome of the case, even though it did not result in overturning the 1994 law enacted to prevent blockades of abortion clinics.

Earlier this year the U.S. attorney's office failed for the second time to get a federal appeals court to overturn an acquittal of the retired auxiliary bishop of the

Raleigh, N.C., Diocese and the Franciscan Friar of the Renewal, on charges stemming from a prayer vigil at an abortion clinic.

The case had dragged on since August 1996, when the two men sat down in the driveway of an abortion clinic in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. Their action followed others that led U.S. District Judge John E. Sprizzo of New York to issue an injunction against further efforts to block clinic access, which they violated.

Bishop Lynch and Brother Fidelis were charged with criminal contempt of court. But Sprizzo found them not guilty of violating his own permanent injunction, saying a conviction would require showing that their violations were "willful."

He reasoned that the defendants may have been justified because they believed they were defending innocent human life.

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