

WORLD & NATION

Letter protests travel warning

JERUSALEM (CNS) — A group of 61 American Christian religious leaders has asked the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, to help reverse or modify the State Department's travel warning on Israel.

"The current travel warning acts as an economic sanction against both Israel and Palestinian Authority," said the group in a Dec. 2 letter. "This is resulting in severe economic hardships upon all parties in the area.

"Especially hard hit are those Israelis and Palestinians whose livelihoods are dependent upon tourism," they added. "We urge you to cancel or modify (the warning) by listing specific locations within Israel and the Palestinian Authority (in) the U.S. State Department's travel advisory."

The Catholic and Protestant group was on a fact-finding mission sponsored by the Journeys Unlimited tour company, which had arranged the five-day trip after the leaders either canceled or postponed planned pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

"The travel advisory is really hurting people economically with very little justification," said Father Robert McCann of All Saints Church in Hayward, Calif. "Once inside Bethlehem everything is clean and you can see that they refurbished for 2000. The reports we are seeing in the media are not reflecting the physical experience we are seeing here. The incidents are in isolated areas and the other areas are fine."

Bullet hits deacon visiting Bethlehem

By Gina Keating
Catholic News Service

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — When Deacon John Meyer heard distant gunfire from his room at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute outside Bethlehem, his curiosity led him down a hallway.

Within seconds, Deacon Meyer fell to the ground. He had been shot in the head with a bullet later identified as having been fired from an M-16 rifle.

The bullet, which authorities said was shot from about a half-mile away, was slowed as it came through a window at the compound before piercing his forehead and lodging in his skull.

Deacon Meyer, diocesan director of catechetical ministry for the Phoenix Diocese and a deacon at St. Bernadette Church in Scottsdale, is at home still recuperating from the shooting, which occurred Oct. 4. After the shooting, he underwent two hours of surgery and spent a night in an Israeli hospital.

He is expected to return to work after the first of the year.

In an interview with *The Catholic Sun*, Phoenix's diocesan newspaper, the deacon said he sensed God's grace in his survival of a potentially fatal shooting.

"I could see God's divine providence," he said, "but I'm still discerning what this all means."

The shooting interrupted what was to have been a three-month study and spiritual renewal sabbatical in Tantur, which is on the border between Israel and Palestine.

Deacon Meyer and his wife, Mary Ann, a theology teacher at Xavier College Preparatory, a diocesan high school in Phoenix, said they felt no trepidation surrounding their trip to Tantur. It is adja-



Reuters/CNS

Catholic clergy pray in the grotto of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem Dec. 5. Officials in the town of Christ's birth have canceled most Christmas festivities due to the ongoing fighting between Palestinians and Israeli forces in the West Bank area. Some 300 people have died, mostly Palestinians, in the violence.

cent to property that serves as an Israeli checkpoint for people going into and out of Bethlehem.

The couple was among a group of 34 people representing eight Christian denominations from 11 countries. The deacon said he chose the program because it

is well respected by people involved in ecumenism.

They were able to complete two-thirds of the program, and participated in most of the trips to the holy sites before flying back to the United States about a week following his surgery.

As a result of their ordeal and the increased violence in the region, some participants in the program also returned home.

Tensions between Palestinians and Israelis began to flare up prior to the group's arrival at the holy site of Rachel's Tomb, where clashes between Israelis and Palestinians occur.

Located about a half-mile from Tantur, and near the entrance to the city of Bethlehem, the tomb is one of Judaism's most sacred shrines. It is also revered by Muslims and Christians.

"(From) what I've read concerning human rights groups, and what I have witnessed, Israel is using an excessive amount of force," Deacon Meyer said. "Life can change in a blink of an eye; maybe some good can happen in a blink of an eye. In a mysterious way, maybe there can be some healing, but peace cannot come without justice in the land."

Deacon Meyer and his wife have remained guided by faith and consoled by humor in the wake of his bullet wound and another family accident that also could have been a tragedy.

Just weeks before the shooting, their only daughter suffered a near-fatal head injury in a hiking accident in Mexico.

"Both events could have been so awful, but the right people were at the right places," Mary Ann Meyer said. "God was watching over our family, although people have told us maybe we should start wearing helmets."

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