

Happy Easter



Reuters/CNS

An Israeli border policeman stands guard on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem.

# Tour operators avoid Holy Land

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (CNS) — Front-page images of Israelis and Palestinians burying their dead amid rising tensions in the Holy Land are taking a heavy toll on U.S.-based tour operators specializing in travel to Israel.

Until the situation calms down, many travel agencies said they planned to postpone Holy Land travel altogether or to put more emphasis on religious pilgrimages to destinations other than Israel.

"Nobody wants to go there — even though we had some groups there recently and nobody had any problems," said Fabrizio Fabbri, president of Unitours in Greenwich, Conn.

Unitours has shifted its pilgrimage travel focus to Italy, several Marian shrines and

its "Journey of Paul" tours through Greece and Turkey.

Still, the Holy Land had represented a large percentage of Unitour's business. To lose that market has hurt all the North American agencies operating in that market — especially after the record year in tourism that Israel enjoyed in 2000.

Even Unitour was not expecting the current unrest to last as long as it has, "so it is starting to hurt," Fabbri told *The Florida Catholic*. He speculated that the fallout for tourism workers in Israel and the Palestinian territories is even worse.

Tourism is one of the top three industries in Israel, and "once you cut off that, it gets tough for everybody to live," he added.

The Miami-based Tuchman Tours, which specialized in travel to Israel, went out of business recently, in part because of the continued Mideast turbulence, according to Pini Shani, the Dallas-based southern regional director of the Israel Ministry of Tourism.

Shani said travel to Israel is down about 50 percent this year — despite the fact that a record 2.5 million people visited the Holy Land in 2000. Many were inspired to go there because of the millennium year and Pope John Paul II's historic visit.

The president of Ohio-based Regina Tours said he learned long ago to diversify his business.

"We are hurt, but not down and out," said Jim Adair, in tourism since 1981.



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