

Christians Gather in Jerusalem to Show Support for Israel

✖ Some 5,000 Christians from 100 nations marched through the streets of Jerusalem Tuesday to show their solidarity with the nation of Israel.

March participants waved Zionist banners and flags, while others wore T-shirts that read "Jerusalem United" as part of a campaign responding to political pressure on Israel to stop construction in the largely Arab eastern part of the city.

Organizers said the marchers were not affected by unrest in some parts of Jerusalem, where rumors that Israeli extremists planned to march on a shrine holy to Muslims and Jews fueled low-level violence.

The Jerusalem March is part of the 30th annual Feast of Tabernacles being held this week in Israel. The event, hosted by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ), marks Sukkot, a Jewish festival celebrating the ingathering of the harvest and remembering the 40 years God provided for the Jewish people as they wandered in the wilderness.

For many Christians, the event also points to a prophecy in Zechariah 14 that says people from every nation will join hands with the children of Israel to celebrate Sukkot.

ICEJ leaders said this year's Feast also is meant to reaffirm the group's commitment to see an undivided Jerusalem under Israel's sovereignty. In recent months, Israel has faced increased international pressure to freeze expansion activity into lands the Palestinians claim, including east Jerusalem, as part of Mideast peace negotiations.

In July the Obama administration called on Israel to stop building in east Jerusalem, an area the Palestinians want to make their future capital. Most of the international community does not recognize Israel's claim to sovereignty over the entire city, including the eastern sector it captured and annexed in 1967.

ICEJ leaders said controversy over Jerusalem's status launched the first Feast of Tabernacles event, which was aimed at showing Christian support for the 1980 Jerusalem Law, in which Israel states that "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel."

"Jerusalem is not a settlement," said the Rev. Malcolm Hedding, executive director of the ICEJ. "It's the holy city and capital of Israel. Thirty years ago we opened in defense of Jerusalem as the undivided capital. We have never moved away from that mandate and will continue to stand with a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty."

As part of its Jerusalem United campaign, the ICEJ is conducting an online petition assessing Christian support for a united Jerusalem. The results will be presented to the mayor of Jerusalem in the coming months.

The seven-day Feast, which peaks with Tuesday's popular march, is expected to mark Israel's largest tourist event and the largest solidarity mission to Israel this year. The Israel Ministry of Tourism expects at least \$16 million to be invested into the local economy through the course of the week.

"This remarkable record of three decades of Christian pilgrimage, even in times of global economic downturns and great difficulties for Israel, is testimony that the Feast was inspired by God and enjoys His favor," Hedding said.

The Feast began Friday with a live concert recording at Ein Gedi, along the shores of the Dead Sea, led by Messianic

worship leader Paul Wilbur. At the concert, a 10-ton flag of Jerusalem-considered the world's largest flag by the Guinness Book of World Records-was displayed as part of the Jerusalem United campaign.

On Saturday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed participants at the opening gala by video. On Sunday, Robert Stearns of Eagles' Wings Ministries in New York hosted a service marking the Day of Prayer for the Peace of Jerusalem.

During his taped comments on the opening night of the Feast, Netanyahu thanked the ICEJ and visiting Christians for their solidarity with the Jewish nation.

"In the worst of times, you've always stood up for Israel," Netanyahu said. "And you've communicated something very clear to us. You said to the people of Israel: 'You are not alone. We are with you.' Well, we say to you today: 'The people of Israel are with you. We're together.'"