

Foreign Ministry Strike May Force Pope Francis to Postpone Israel Trip

A strike by employees of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs may force Pope Francis to postpone his visit to Israel, scheduled for May.

Yigal Palmor, the Foreign Ministry's spokesman, said the workers—who are striking over wages, taxes and pensions—will be unable to plan the visits of any foreign dignitaries during the strike's duration.

"We are not targeting the pope, or any other dignitary for that matter, but a strike is a strike," he said.

But Vatican officials said Friday that they expected the visit to go ahead as planned.

Archbishop Giuseppe Lazzarotto, the papal ambassador to Israel, told Religion News Service "nothing has changed so far" with regard to the Israeli portion of the pope's May 24-26 visit to the Middle East, which also includes stops in Jordan and the West Bank.

Lazzarotto said it is "premature to draw any conclusions" regarding the strike. "It is evident to anyone that a labor dispute can disrupt preparations for the pope's visit, but no decision has been taken."

Visits by other foreign leaders, such as British Prime Minister David Cameron, have already had to be reshuffled.

Palmor said the ministry has briefed the foreign diplomatic corps on the situation, namely that "as long as the strike is on, visits, including those of advanced teams, will not be handled." He said Lazzarotto has spoken to the ministry's

chief of protocol.

On Friday afternoon in Rome, the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, told reporters that he expects the visit to go ahead.

If the visit is postponed, it could be more of a blow to Palestinians, because the pope had scheduled a Mass in Bethlehem in the West Bank to encourage the struggling Christian community there.

The pope did not plan to celebrate a public Mass in Israel.

(David Gibson contributed to this report.)

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