

Jewish Extremists Scrawl Anti-Christian Graffiti Ahead of Pope's Holy Land Visit

The Roman Catholic Church in Jerusalem, preparing for a papal visit later this month, has expressed alarm over threats to Christians scrawled by suspected Jewish extremists on church property in the Holy Land.

In an incident on Monday, "Death to Arabs and Christians and all those who hate Israel" was daubed in Hebrew on an outer column of the Office of the Assembly of Bishops at the Notre Dame Center in East Jerusalem.

"The wave of fanaticism and intimation against Christians continues," the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem posted on its website, referring to so-called "price tag" incidents.

"Mere coincidence?" the patriarchate statement asked. "The Notre Dame Center is property of the Holy See and this provocation comes two weeks before Pope Francis' visit to the Holy Land and Jerusalem."

In recent years, "price tag" attacks have targeted mosques, Palestinian homes and Christian monasteries in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, areas Israel captured in a 1967 war and Palestinians seek as part of a future state.

"Price tagging"—a reference by ultranationalist Jews to making the government "pay" for any curbs on Jewish settlement on Palestinian land—has also occurred in Israeli military installations in the West Bank and Arab villages in Israel.

Pope Francis is due to tour the Holy Land from May 24 to 26, visiting Jordan, the West Bank and Jerusalem, where he will meet Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of the

world's Orthodox Christians.

The pontiff, who like his predecessors John Paul and Benedict has friendly ties with Jewish religious leaders, is due to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Notre Dame Center, located just outside the walls of the old city.

Price Tag 'Terrorism'

Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon has described "price tag" attacks as terrorism and pledged to step up efforts to curb them.

The bishops' statement said they "are very concerned about the lack of security" for Christian property and what they called the "lack of responsiveness from the political sector" after earlier attacks. They feared "an escalation of violence."

The frequency of "price tag" attacks—14 have been reported this year—has risen sharply over the past month since the Israeli military demolished structures in a West Bank settlement built without government authorization.

Internal Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni said on Wednesday they would ask the cabinet to classify groups behind "price tag" attacks as terrorist organizations, opening the way for the possible use of detention without trial against members.

Despite dozens of arrests over the past year of suspected "price-taggers," there have been few convictions. Police say there are only a few score culprits, many known by name, but about half of them are minors to whom courts show leniency.

The patriarchate said that the heads of churches in the Holy Land are preparing "a series of actions aimed at informing local and international public opinion, and to make the authorities and law officials aware of their responsibilities."

Reporting by Jeffrey Heller; Editing by Tom Heneghan

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