

Preparations for Christmas Underway in Bethlehem

In the lead up to the Christmas season, designated as Dec. 9, to Jan. 20, 2013, Israel is anticipating the arrival 300,000 pilgrims and tourists to Bethlehem.

A list of measures has been approved for civil policies relating to Palestinian Christians in the region: during the holiday more than 20,000 people will be granted permits to enter Israel with no limits regarding age or family status. Furthermore, 200 Palestinian Christians will be granted permits to travel abroad via Ben Gurion airport and 300 will be granted visiting permits into the Judea and Samaria region according to a list provided by the Palestinian Authority to COGAT.

Coordinated tours inside Israel were authorized for Christians from the Judea and Samaria region. Also, 500 Palestinian Christians from Gaza have been authorized to enter Israel and the Judea and Samaria region.

Monday, the Coordination and Liaison Administration (DCL) for Bethlehem arranged a convention of representatives from various international organizations that operate in the region including UNRWA, IRCC, and representatives of foreign embassies to update them about the DCL's preparations lead up to the holiday, including security measures and access to medical care. The good-will gestures and easing of restrictions were also announced at the convention.

In addition to the convention for representatives of international organizations, there was a convention in Jerusalem yesterday, which was organized by Tourism Ministry to honor the coming Christmas holiday. The convention was chaired by the Minister for Tourism, Stas Misezhnikov with

many leaders of the Christian population participating, as well as officers from the Civil Administration.

“This is an event that happens every year in the lead up to Christmas, in which the State of Israel, led by the Ministry of Tourism in conjunction with COGAT and the Civil Administration, host the leaders of the Christian communities in order to wish them well for the approaching Christmas holiday,” said Lt. Col. Salame Daksa, head of the finance branch of the Civil Administration

“This reception is an excellent opportunity to meet people—not just religious leaders but also people from the Tourism Ministry, which enhances the cooperation between us and the State of Israel,” said Peter Malki, a Catholic bishop.

Like Peter, Dr. Suzanna, manager of Christian Friends of Yad Vashem, thinks that the meeting is very important.

“This is a meeting in which the Tourism Ministry of Israel integrates us all and welcomes us; the importance of the meeting is the integration of all of us here,” Dr. Suzanna said.

The Tourism Ministry has also been preparing for the Christmas season. Throughout the holiday beginning on Monday, Dec. 24 at noon and continuing until noon the following day, the Tourism Ministry will be providing non-stop free shuttles between Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.