

Will Palestinian Christians Be Able to Visit Jerusalem for Easter?

Christians in the Gaza Strip have yet to receive any permits to go to Jerusalem to celebrate Easter, they said on Tuesday.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said church authorities had applied for around 600 permits for Gazans to travel, but had not received any, three days before Good Friday.

Israel tightly restricts movements out of the Gaza Strip, territory controlled by Hamas, an Islamist group that it considers a terrorist organization.

The Israeli military-run authority that operates in the West Bank defended its policy to restrict access as many Palestinians had stayed on illegally in the past, and said it would only issue permits to people aged at least 55.

"Israel is a sovereign state and it has the right to decide who will enter its gates. No foreign residents have an inherent right to enter Israel, including Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip," a Civil Administration (COGAT) spokesman said, without saying whether permits would be issued this year.

Church leaders feared more restrictions than usual this year as Easter falls on the same weekend as the start of Passover, a Jewish holiday when Israel boosts security.

Father Ibrahim Shomali, chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, said worshippers should not even be required to get permits.

"We have to have free access to the Holy Land, free access to our holy places," he said at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,

revered as the site of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

"Of course we apply, but in reality there must be no applying for permits to come to visit your own places."

Gaza has only 1,000 Christians – most of them Greek Orthodox – among a population of 2 million in the narrow coastal strip. The Greek Orthodox authorities were not available to comment on Tuesday.

In Gaza, George Antone of the Latin Patriarchate said Israel allowed nearly 570 Christians in total out of Gaza last year, and hoped they would make it again this time.

"So far there has been no response. I will not lose hope but I will be sad if the permits do not come," he said.

Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter a week later, when Palestinians and pilgrims from around the world attend the ceremony of the Holy Fire.

Christian leaders said U.S. President Donald Trump's decision in December to recognize Jerusalem – sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam – as Israel's capital could embolden Israeli authorities' restrictions to their holy sites.

"(Israel) will close every single checkpoint, and this will be more strict than any other year because of the proclamation of Trump and the effects we got from it, and that we will get from it," Shomali said.

Youssef Daher, of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre, said Trump's decision could lead to further Israel pressure on Christian authorities, because "they think that they have a free hand."

In February, Christian leaders took the rare decision to close the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for three days, in protest at a new Israeli tax policy and a proposed land expropriation law. {eo}

