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Israel's Visa Denials Portend Woes for Church Institutions Religious Running Into Bureaucratic Roadblock

ROME, MARCH 25, 2004 (Zenit.org).- Catholic religious living in Israel and in the Occupied Territories are facing a hard time because of the authorities' systematic refusal to grant visas, the Italian press reported.

The result: the Church in the Holy Land might not have enough personnel to run the "shrines, parishes, hospitals and schools," the Rome newspaper Il Tempo reported.

On March 17, for example, two women religious of the Most Holy Rosary congregation were detained. Two days earlier, a Franciscan friar was also blocked, the newspaper said.

Priests and religious who have been in the Holy Land for a long time are having serious problems, as the office of the Interior Ministry is not renewing their permits, the newspaper said.

"Lack of visas is also becoming a humanitarian problem," Il Tempo noted. "Some religious have to leave Israel urgently to take care of parents on their deathbed. But they cannot leave the country as they run the risk of not being able to return."

"The new Interior Minister and other governmental figures in the past have calmed the situation and promised ecclesiastical authorities to resolve it, but have failed to do so" now, the newspaper said.

The refusal of visas raises question about the Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the state of Israel, signed 10 years ago. The agreement gives the Church the right to deploy its own personnel and institutions, Il Tempo explained.

"What is ironic is that these situations never happened before, when there were no such agreements," the newspaper noted.

According to estimates, quoted by the newspaper, there are about 100 ecclesiastics and religious living in an "illegal" situation, as their visas have not been renewed.

Franciscan Father David Jaeger, a spokesman of the Holy Land Custody, told AsiaNews: "We are dealing with a very serious problem indeed, one which is getting worse by the day."

"Promises made by top-ranking government officials have not been kept so far," he said. "They won't let us know their reasons behind the new policy. There are no official channels of dialogue to bring about a resolution to the situation."