

## **Israelis Aiming to Ease Visa Delays for Religious and Priests**

**Ambassador to Holy See Says Solution Is Imminent**

**ROME, APRIL 19, 2004 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).**- An Israeli commission is reviewing the bureaucratic bottleneck that causes delays in the issuance of visas to religious and priests in the Holy Land.

Last month, the Italian press reported on the increasingly difficult situation that Catholic religious face in Israel and in the Occupied Territories due to the authorities' systematic refusal to renew their visas.

According to a report April 13, the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See sent AsiaNews an official note stating that the "directors and officials of different Ministries ... together with the ambassador of Israel to the Holy See, have made evident the need to resolve in a brief period of time the complex and delicate situation."

"Immediately after Easter procedures will be accelerated to unblock the accumulation of dispatches," the note states.

According to the text sent by the Israeli diplomatic headquarters to the Holy See, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon himself requested the establishment of an Inter-Ministerial Commission to "review the criteria, rules and necessary times ... as well as a review of the whole bureaucratic mechanism" which has led to the delay in the issuance of visas.

The commission already held meetings on several occasions in February.

The last meeting took place April 5 at the Ministry of the Interior. There was a debate on the new procedure that eases bureaucratic practices, shortens security controls, and revises the categories of visas -- including for priests, volunteers, temporary workers and scholarship holders.

Oded Ben Hur, Israel's ambassador to the Holy See, told AsiaNews last week that the effects of the modification of the procedure might be felt "in seven to 10 days."

The note also stressed that "great importance" that the Israeli government attaches "to the strengthening of good relations between Israel and the Christian world and, in particular, with Catholics and the Holy See" and affirmed that "the apostolic nuncio in Israel will be informed of all decisions and deliberations in regard to the visas."

Ecclesiastical sources in Jerusalem, contacted by AsiaNews, said: "We hope that this time the promises -- reiterated other times over the last two years -- will be fulfilled."

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