

Vatican Mideast synod ends with criticism of Israel

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VATICAN CITY, Oct 23 (Reuters) - Israel cannot use the Biblical concept of a promised land or a chosen people to justify new settlements in Jerusalem or territorial claims, a Vatican synod on the Middle East said on Saturday.

In its concluding message after two weeks of meetings, the synod of bishops from the Middle East also said it hoped a two-state solution for peace between Israel and the Palestinians could be lifted from dream to reality and called for peaceful conditions that would stop a Christian exodus from the region.

"We have meditated on the situation of the holy city of Jerusalem. We are anxious about the unilateral initiatives that threaten its composition and risk to change its demographic balance," the message said.

US-brokered peace talks have stalled since Israel rejected appeals to extend a temporary moratorium on settlement construction in the occupied West Bank that expired last month.

Since the freeze expired, Israel has announced plans to build another 238 homes in two East Jerusalem neighbourhoods, drawing the condemnation of Palestinians and world leaders.

In a separate part of the document – a section on cooperation with Jews – the synod fathers also took issue with Jews who use the Bible to justify settlements in the West Bank, which Israel captured in 1967. "Recourse to theological and biblical positions which use the Word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable," the document said.

Many Jewish settlers and right-wing Israelis claim a biblical birthright to the occupied West Bank, which they call Judea and Samaria and regard as a part of historical, ancient Israel given to the Jews by God.

"THERE IS NO LONGER A CHOSEN PEOPLE"

Asked about the passage at a news conference, Greek-Melchite Archbishop Cyrille Salim Bustros, said: "We Christians cannot speak about the promised land for the Jewish people. There is no longer a chosen people. All men and women of all countries have become the chosen people.

"The concept of the promised land cannot be used as a base for the justification of the return of Jews to Israel and the displacement of Palestinians," he added. "The justification of Israel's occupation of the land of Palestine cannot be based on sacred scriptures." The synod's concluding message repeated a Vatican call for Jerusalem to have a special status "which respects its particular character" as a city sacred to the three great monotheistic religions -- Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Jerusalem remains a key issue of dispute. Palestinians want East Jerusalem for capital of a future state. Israel has annexed the area, a move never recognised internationally, and has declared Jerusalem to be its "united and eternal" capital.

Israel did not include East Jerusalem as part of its 10-month building freeze, though most plans there were put on hold in March, when the US protested reports of a new housing project leaked during a visit by Vice President Joe Biden.

East Jerusalem was also captured by Israel in 1967. While recognising "the suffering and insecurity in which Israelis live" and the need for Israel to enjoy peace within internationally recognised borders, the document was much more expansive and detailed on the situation of Palestinians.

It said Palestinians "are suffering the consequences of the Israeli occupation: the lack of freedom of movement, the wall of separation and the military checkpoints, the political prisoners, the demolition of homes, the disturbance of socio-economic life and the thousands of refugees".

It urged Christians in the region not to sell their homes and properties. "It is a vital aspect of the lives of those who remain there and for those who one day will return there." It condemned terrorism "from wherever it may proceed" as well as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and discrimination against Christians.

PHOTO CAPTION: Pope Benedict XVI (3rd L) addresses the audience on the last day of a synod for Middle East bishops at the Vatican October 23, 2010. The photograph was taken with a fish eye lens.
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