

World's 'lowest city' Jericho celebrates 10,000 years

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Jerusalem, November 8 (ENInews)--Many people in the area believe there is little to celebrate, but Jericho, made famous in the Bible and one the earth's lowest and oldest inhabited cities, has begun a year-long celebration of its 10 000th anniversary.

So far it has been a quiet affair as the city that borders Jordan in the Palestinian-administered West Bank area is not a global tourist haven. Still a special cabinet meeting opened the festivities on 10.10.10, a day deemed good for the biblically-famed town that features in many popular Western songs.

The 10 000 year celebration launch in the city that lies below sea level was led by Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who said the celebrations were part of a national project aimed at completing the "building and preparation" of the Palestinian State.

The celebration also included a 4.5 kilometre (2.8 Mile) race, a brass band and fireworks.

The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism said it hoped to "solidify" Jericho as a key tourism destination by building on the city's "ancient history, culture, religious heritage and unique geography".

Jericho is also the second most visited city on the West Bank, following Bethlehem, the town in which the Bible states that the birth of Jesus took place.

The Old Testament of the Bible records in the book of Joshua 6, how the ancient Israelites captured Jericho by following God's instruction to walk round the city sounding a ram's horn leading to the collapse of its walls.

The Palestinian ministry says it is working in conjunction with the private sector and donors on the three-year "Jericho 10 000" project to develop the tourism infrastructure in Jericho and the Jordan Valley. Projects range from site restorations and developing new themed routes that would combine spiritual, cultural and nature activities.

News agencies reported, however, that local residents complained about the low-key character of the opening celebrations and officials said they were unable to complete many infrastructure projects, planned since 2007, due to Israeli restrictions and a lack of international funding.

Jericho, known in the Bible as "The City of Palm Trees", was the first West Bank town to be handed over to Palestinian control in 1994 as part of the Oslo accords, which were at the time seen as a breakthrough in Middle East peace efforts.

On 25 October, the Jerusalem-based Media Central organization said it had cancelled a planned tour of journalists from Israel to Jericho, which was to have taken place the following day. It said they were "unwelcome" after it received the message about foreign journalists visiting through Israeli media facilitators.

Archaeologists have uncovered evidence of 20 consecutive settlements in Jericho, the first dating back to 9000 BC. They have also found urban fortifications dating back to 7000 BC. Archaeological remains in the area also include the winter palace of King Herod, who ruled in the area at the time of Jesus. There is the winter palace, dating from AD 743 and what Israeli archaeologists claim to be the world's oldest Jewish synagogue dating back to 50-70 BC.