

Israel not renewing visas, Catholics say: Government refusal precipitates crisis

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The Israeli government's refusal to renew visas to Christian clergy in the Holy Land has precipitated a crisis with the Vatican and the entire Christian world, say Catholic representatives. All told, it is estimated that hundreds of priests, nuns and Christian volunteers have not been granted permission to remain in Israel.

Israeli police now have the legal power to arrest and deport all in this category, although so far no church leader has reported that any staff have been forced to leave. "It's a problem not only for the Catholic Church but for all [Christian] denominations in the Holy Land," a spokesman for the Apostolic Delegation, the Vatican's representatives in Jerusalem, said at the end of March.

The spokesman, who asked not to be identified by name, said despite repeated promises from the Israeli government, no solutions to the problem have been found. At least 130 Roman Catholic representatives have been affected, but there are believed to be hundreds of others affected in other Christian groups.

The daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* reported March 30 that several monks and nuns have been held by Israeli immigration police for lacking the legal authority to remain in Israel. The head of the Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry's religions department, Gadi Golan, told the newspaper he was aware of a Franciscan monk who had been detained by police as he was traveling on a bus to classes at Tel Aviv's Bar-Ilan University. He was set free after the intervention of Catholic church leaders.

The spokesman for the Apostolic Delegation in Jerusalem said many Christian representatives are afraid to leave Israel for fear of not being able to return. David Jaeger, a Franciscan priest-official, echoed these thoughts. "In the Catholic world there is a growing view that Israel has deliberately framed a policy to hurt the church. Nobody believes that some clerk in the population registry [in the Israeli

Interior Ministry] is able to reach these decisions on his own," Jaeger told *Ha'aretz*. - *Ecumenical News International*