



Jerusalem's Church of Holy Sepulchre reopens after protest

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, revered as the site of Jesus's crucifixion and burial, reopened on Wednesday after Israel backtracked on Tuesday from a tax plan and draft property legislation that triggered a three-day protest.

The rare decision on Sunday by church leaders to close the ancient holy site, a favorite among tourists and pilgrims, with the busy Easter holiday approaching put extra pressure on Israel to re-evaluate and suspend the moves.

After receiving a statement from the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian clergy announced on Tuesday the church would reopen the next morning.

Before dawn on Wednesday, Wajeeh Nusseibeh, who is charge of locking and unlocking the church, climbed a stepladder and turned the key to open its main wooden door.

"It's one of the holiest sites for our religion and we prayed very hard these last three days that things would change and it would be open for us to be able to go in," said an American pilgrim, who gave her name only as Laurie.

An Israeli committee led by cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi will negotiate with church representatives to try to resolve the dispute over plans to tax commercial properties owned by the church in Jerusalem, Netanyahu's statement said

Church leaders, in a joint statement, welcomed the dialogue.

"After the constructive intervention of the prime minister, the churches look forward to engage with Minister Hanegbi, and with all those who love Jerusalem to ensure that our holy city, where our Christian presence continues to face challenges, remains a place where the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) may live and thrive together."

The Jerusalem Municipality, Netanyahu said, would suspend tax collection actions it had taken in recent weeks. Mayor Nir Barkat has said the churches owed the city more than \$180 million in property tax from their commercial holdings, adding that "houses of worship" would remain exempt.

While the review of the tax plan is under way, work on legislation that would allow Israel to expropriate land in Jerusalem that churches have sold to private real estate firms in recent years will also be suspended, Netanyahu said. The bill's declared aim is to protect homeowners against the possibility private companies will not extend their leases of land on which their residences stand. Churches are major landowners in Jerusalem. They say such a law would make it harder for them to find buyers for their land- sales that help to cover operating costs of their religious institutions.

Church of Holy Sepulchre Reopens Wednesday Following Israeli Moves to Solve Crisis

Haaretz - Israel News, Wednesday, February 28, 2018

Israel earlier backtracked on steps that sparked crisis, including legislation that spurred controversy while Jerusalem municipality will postpone tax collection from church-owned properties

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre reopens Wednesday in response to Israeli steps to solve the ongoing crisis rocking relations between the Israeli government and the Christian community, three days after the church was closed in protest.

According to a statement released by the heads of the major churches, the church will reopen for visitors at 4 A.M. local time.

Israel opted on Tuesday to take steps to resolve its ongoing crisis with church leaders and the Christian community that led to their indefinite shuttering of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Sunday. The Israeli government will freeze a controversial bill that recently spurred the crisis, while the Jerusalem municipality will postpone the collection of taxes from church-owned properties.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat have established a team headed by Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi to try and formulate a solution concerning the issue of tax collection from the churches, according to a statement by the Prime Minister's Office.

Further, Netanyahu has asked Hanegbi to look into the matter of land sales in Jerusalem, following a request by the heads of major churches. All pending legislation on the matter will be shelved while Hanegbi reviews the issue.

The decision to close the church was in protest of Jerusalem City Hall's decision to act on a policy that any church properties that are not places of worship should be subject to municipal taxes. The municipality claims the three Christian denominations collectively owe some 186 million shekels (\$53 million) in back taxes.

The move to close the church was also timed to coincide with a meeting by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation, which had been scheduled to discuss a bill, to be applied retroactively, to allow the state to expropriate land in Jerusalem that the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches have sold off since 2010 to private investors. Discussion of that bill has since been postponed.

The ministerial panel was set to discuss the church lands bill, which is designed to put an end to most of the major land sales carried out by the churches to private real estate companies. Most of the lands involved, about 500 dunams (125 acres) are in the centrally located neighborhoods of Rehavia, Talbieh and Nayot. Some of the residents living on the land have protested the move, which would force them to evacuate when the lease on the land ends.

The bill would authorize the finance minister, with the approval of the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee, to expropriate lands sold since the beginning of the decade in return for compensation for the companies that bought the land.

The bill is quite unusual in terms of Israeli jurisprudence, and because it applies retroactively to land sales that have been finalized. It limits the property rights of the churches and private firms that bought the land.

Jerusalem's Church of Holy Sepulchre reopens after protest

February 28, 2018 / 2:31 AM / Updated an hour ago

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, revered as the site of Jesus's crucifixion and burial, reopened on Wednesday after Israel backtracked on Tuesday from a tax plan and draft property legislation that triggered a three-day protest.

The rare decision on Sunday by church leaders to close the ancient holy site, a favorite among tourists and pilgrims, with the busy Easter holiday approaching put extra pressure on Israel to re-evaluate and suspend the moves.

After receiving a statement from the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian clergy announced on Tuesday the church would reopen the next morning.

Before dawn on Wednesday, Wajeeh Nusseibeh, who is charge of locking and unlocking the church, climbed a stepladder and turned the key to open its main wooden door.

“It’s one of the holiest sites for our religion and we prayed very hard these last three days that things would change and it would be open for us to be able to go in,” said an American pilgrim, who gave her name only as Laurie.

An Israeli committee led by cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi will negotiate with church representatives to try to resolve the dispute over plans to tax commercial properties owned by the church in Jerusalem, Netanyahu’s statement said.

Church leaders, in a joint statement, welcomed the dialogue.

“After the constructive intervention of the prime minister, the churches look forward to engage with Minister Hanegbi, and with all those who love Jerusalem to ensure that our holy city, where our Christian presence continues to face challenges, remains a place where the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) may live and thrive together.”

The Jerusalem Municipality, Netanyahu said, would suspend tax collection actions it had taken in recent weeks. Mayor Nir Barkat has said the churches owed the city more than \$180 million in property tax from their commercial holdings, adding that “houses of worship” would remain exempt.

While the review of the tax plan is under way, work on legislation that would allow Israel to expropriate land in Jerusalem that churches have sold to private real estate firms in recent years will also be suspended, Netanyahu said.

The bill’s declared aim is to protect homeowners against the possibility private companies will not extend their leases of land on which their residences stand.

Churches are major landowners in Jerusalem. They say such a law would make it harder for them to find buyers for their land- sales that help to cover operating costs of *their religious institutions*.

Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem
Middle Atlantic Lieutenancy
Post Office Box 29480
Washington, DC 20017