

ACT Palestine Forum statement: Calling that Christians Have Unimpeded Access to Jerusalem During Easter Celebrations

The ACT Alliance is asking all people of good will to pray and act in solidarity with people in the Holy Land who will be seeking access to holy sites in Jerusalem during Easter and Ramadan time to ensure that freedom of worship is protected.

During the Holy Fire Saturday celebrations, tradition has always been that Christians- from all denominations- gather on the Orthodox Patriarchate's rooftop. Once the light is out from the empty tomb, Christians share it from each other's candles, and the light is taken to their homes and other towns. The light is also taken abroad to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Greece- to name a few countries.

The 2022 Holy Fire Saturday celebrations witnessed the most unprecedented restrictions since the occupation began in 1967. Israeli police sealed off the Christian Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City and prevented access to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Orthodox Patriarchate. Hundreds of police officers manned no less than 15 checkpoints inside a radius of 500 meters. Clergy were not respected and had difficulty accessing the Old City, Coptic Christians from Egypt and other pilgrims were the subject of targeted harassment at the Jaffa Gate area, and local community members were beaten up at the checkpoints.

Ahead of the 2022 celebrations, Israeli police announced that the numbers will be limited to 1000 worshipers inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and 500 on the Orthodox Patriarchate's rooftop. The Patriarchate refused these measures, since the usual number of participants is ten to eleven thousand people. The Patriarchate issued a statement calling on the faithful to come to Jerusalem's Old City, and not to succumb to fear and intimidation by the police.

The 2022 violence and restrictions by Israeli police drew strong reactions worldwide. The World Council of Churches, as well as the local Heads of Churches, issued solidarity statements and called for respect of the status quo and religious freedom in Jerusalem. UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres issued a statement emphasizing the need to "protect and respect the status quo in the holy sites." Eight Members of Congress sent a letter to US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, asking the Biden Administration to protect religious freedom and Christian presence in Jerusalem.

The police had announced a weak excuse ahead of the Holy Fire Saturday celebrations, that the aim was to control the numbers for safety purposes. Throughout history, the only incident due to crowds inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre happened in 1834. Before the 1967 occupation, Christians would arrive by private cars from Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Moreover, the Jordanians used to deploy a small number of security officers, and the celebrations went on peacefully and joyfully.

During the week before, the 2022 Latin Palm Sunday procession was stopped suddenly by Israeli police, as the celebrants were on their way to the Christian Quarter, and in what amounted to yet another violation of Jerusalem's historical and religious status quo. The road was closed as the scout groups and the faithful were carrying their palms, chanting their hymns, and praying while they prepared to enter Jerusalem. The faithful tried to reason with the police, but they were kept waiting for nearly one hour until the police decided to reopen the road.

We call for the protection of the rights of Christians – irrespective of denomination – to exercise religious rituals in Jerusalem freely, and that Christians from the West Bank and Gaza have unimpeded access to the city. Orthodox Holy Fire Saturday will be on 15 April 2023. We urge the Government of Israel not to impose checkpoints, and that the police refrain from using violence against Christian worshipers and clergy. Moreover, Muslim rights must be respected in terms of unimpeded access to Jerusalem during the holy month of Ramadan.