



Notice to international and local media.

10:00hrs – 11:00hrs – press conference at the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem

**CELEBRATION OF ONE OF CHRISTIANITY’S MOST IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES - HOLY FIRE – TO BE UNREASONABLY RESTRICTED BY ISRAEL POLICE**

In response to the continuing imposition of ever-harsher restrictions to the celebration of the ceremony of Holy Fire, the Patriarchate along with the heads of churches of Jerusalem called time and again on the Israel authorities to intervene to allow Christians to worship freely.

Holy Saturday is the last day of Orthodox Easter and the celebration of Holy Fire is the most important ceremony for the Orthodox and other Eastern Churches, as well as the Christian community in the Holy Land.

Pilgrims travel from around the world to join Christian communities in the Holy Land, to witness the miraculous lighting of ‘Holy Fire’ inside Jesus’ tomb, the Holy Sepulchre, by the Holy Spirit.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is the most holy site in all of Christianity, the tomb that Jesus was placed in after the crucifixion, and the site of the Resurrection.

This ceremony been celebrated since the first years of Christianity, and was first recorded as taking place in 328 AD, as mentioned by historian Eusebius. It is one of the most holy, visually inspiring, and moving ceremonies of the church year.

Restrictions include:

- 200 police inside the church
- security checkpoints throughout Jerusalem’s Old City, impeding access for worshippers to the church of the Holy Sepulchre and the procession
- limiting access to the church to fewer than 2,000 people, down from 10,000 in previous years

*“These heavy handed and unnecessary restrictions will profoundly impact the spiritual wellbeing, morale, and religious freedom of the Christian communities in Jerusalem, as well as believers from around the world.”*

*“The Israel police claim that these restrictions are for safety reasons. They are not. The church has always coped safely and smoothly with over five times the numbers of worshippers allowed this year.”*

*“Impeding the religious freedom of our Christian communities is yet another example of the hostile environment faced by Christians in the Holy Land, life as a Christian is becoming increasingly untenable.”*

Since 2005 the Israeli authorities started imposing checkpoints and barriers around the Old City of Jerusalem, restricting access to the ceremony under the pretext of public safety.

For the past two years the restrictions on numbers have become increasingly heavy-handed and this year limited to 1,800 which will prevent the local community from accessing the church as well as international pilgrims from around the world.

The Police are further burdening the Churches by announcing that the Churches are responsible for the invitations, while tying the Churches hands with the unreasonable restriction.

Ends.

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