Vatican

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Following reports that U.S. President Donald Trump planned to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Pope Francis expressed his concern that such a move would further destabilize the Middle East.

Pope Francis said he could not "keep silent about my deep concern" for Jerusalem and urged respect for "the status quo of the city in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the United Nations."

The pope spoke at the end of his weekly general audience Dec. 6, the same day President Trump was expected to announce his decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, fulfilling a promise he made during his presidential campaign.

Former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had made the same promises during their campaigns, but once in office, they did not carry through with the move, citing its potential negative impact on Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Trump, on the other hand, seemed prepared to announce the move, drawing warnings from Middle Eastern and European leaders that overturning the United

States' long-standing policy would further complicate peace negotiations.

The Vatican supports a "two-state solution" for the Holy Land with independence, recognition and secure borders for both Israel and Palestine.

At the same time, the Vatican consistently has called for a special status for Jerusalem, particularly its Old City, in order to protect and guarantee access to the holy sites of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In his appeal, Pope Francis said, "Jerusalem is a unique city, sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims who venerate the holy places of their respective religions, and has a special vocation to peace."

Since the early 1990s, the Vatican has seen as separate issues the need for a special status for the city and questions over the political sovereignty or control of Jerusalem. The political question, it has insisted, must be the result of negotiation.

The internationally unsettled status of Jerusalem and its central importance to Jews, Muslims and Christians explains why, while recognizing the state of Israel, no nation has its embassy in the holy city.

"I pray to the Lord that this identity would be preserved and strengthened for the benefit of the Holy Land, the Middle East and the whole world and that wisdom and prudence would prevail, to avoid adding new elements of tension in a world already shaken and scarred by many cruel conflicts," the pope said.

Before the audience, Pope Francis met with religious leaders from Palestine attending a meeting sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Dialogue, the pope said, takes place at every level, especially "in our families, in our religious communities, between different religious communities, and also in civil society."

However, a key condition for dialogue is mutual respect and a commitment to strengthen that respect "for the sake of recognizing the rights of all people, wherever they happen to be," he said.

"Dialogue is the source of greater mutual knowledge, greater mutual esteem and cooperation in the pursuit of the common good, and generous cooperation in ensuring that those in need receive all necessary assistance," Pope Francis said.

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