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Visiting bishops note strain recent events placed on Mideast countries

by Judith Sudilovsky by Catholic News Service

Jerusalem — Bishops who traveled to the Holy Land to assess the local church's needs noted the "profound anxiety" that the "dark and dramatic events" of the past year have caused in the region.

The civil war in Syria has resulted in an increasingly large number of refugees pouring into other countries, putting an enormous strain on national and government resources, they said. The situation within Israel and Palestine has also become increasingly polarized, they added.

"We shall work hard to persuade our respective governments to recognize the root causes of suffering in this land and to step up their efforts for a just peace," they said in the statement Thursday.

Each year, bishops from the U.S., Canada and Europe travel to the Mideast for the Holy Land Coordination, designed to show support for the churches there. This year's focus was on the "suffering and vulnerable people in the Holy Land."

A Jerusalem news conference in which the bishops' statement was to have been presented to journalists was canceled due to a rare winter snow storm, which left the bishops stuck in Bethlehem, West Bank, to enjoy the unusual sight of the city covered in snow.

In their statement, the bishops encouraged people to take steps toward practical support for the most vulnerable in the Holy Land, including African refugees who are victims of trafficking, migrant workers and Christian prisoners.

They also urged support for the formation of young people in the Palestinian territories and for every effort promoting peace.

"We encourage Christians to come on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where they will experience the same warm hospitality we received," they said.

The bishops said their faith was enriched by "the strength and fortitude" of the people whom they met during their visit, including parishioners in a "vibrant celebration of Mass" in Zarqa, Jordan; those who care for the vulnerable such as the refugees from Syria who are "fleeing terror and violence;" and those "struggling in the face of oppression and insecurity across the countries that make up the Holy Land."

The bishops also said their visit inspired them to promote a "just peace."

"We call upon Christian communities in our home countries and people of good will everywhere to support the work undertaken in this region to build a better future," they said, highlighting the work of Catholic Relief Services in Gaza and the Caritas refugee program in Jordan, whose programs delegation members visited during their Jan. 5-10 stay.

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They said they also felt called to recognize and tell others how faith in God "brings light into the lives of people in the Holy Land," which is expressed practically in the church's commitment to education at Bethlehem University and the American University of Madaba, Jordan.

Bishops signing the statement included Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz.; Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton, Alberta, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops; Bishop Declan Lang of Bristol, chairman of the English and Welsh bishops' Department of International Affairs; Auxiliary Bishop William Kenney of Birmingham, England; Bishop Michel Dubost of Evry, France; Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier, Germany; Bishop Peter Burcher of Reykjavik, Iceland, representing the Nordic bishops' conference; and Archbishop Joan Vives Sicilia of Urgell, Spain.

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