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The Christian Post (21.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ZwNHZw> - srael has granted approximately 850 Palestinian Christians who live in the Gaza Strip permits allowing them to visit Jerusalem for Easter.

"Muhammad al-Maqadma [spokesman for the Palestinian Ministry of Civil Affairs] said the permits were the result of 'dedicated efforts' by Minister of Civil Affairs Hussein al-Sheikh in order to enable hundreds of Christians to celebrate the holidays within a span of 45 days," reported the Middle Eastern publication Ma'an News.

"This is the first time such a large number of Christians from Gaza received permits to travel to the West Bank and Jerusalem," al-Maqadma told Ma'an Saturday.

For years Israel has garnered controversy for how it oversees access to Jerusalem on various holy days for Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

The U.K.-based publication the Catholic Herald ran a story Monday alleging that Israeli officials are purposely restricting Christians access to the holy city.

The Herald cited Yusef Daher, secretary-general of the Jerusalem Interchurch Centre, who argued that officials were not allowing sufficient access to sites such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

"Over the past two years the Jewish Passover and Easter holiday have coincided and while the Jews entering the Old City have had complete freedom of movement, the movement of Christians celebrating Good Friday and the Orthodox Holy Fire ceremony have been restricted by the barriers, Daher said," noted the Herald.

In a press briefing last week, the rector of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Father Jamal Khader contrasted the recent distribution of permits by Israel to past years.

"In previous years, permits (for Gaza Christians) were given randomly, and if they don't have them for the whole family, they cannot come," stated Khader.

"Can you imagine some members of the family coming to celebrate in Jerusalem and leaving behind their family? It's not in our traditions, we celebrate together. So we had the experience in previous years when very few came. This year I'm not sure."

According to Open Doors USA, Christians living in the Palestinian Territories face a "complex" situation regarding their religious rights.

"Christians are squeezed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, their ethnicity causing many restrictions from the Israeli side and their religion putting them in a minority position within the Palestinian community," noted Open Doors.

"The West Bank's ruling Fatah party is formally based on secular principles, and Christians enjoy several rights. Though Christians are largely tolerated by Islamist Hamas, the rights of Christians are neither upheld nor protected in Gaza. Apart from this discrimination, Christians face threats from radical Islamic vigilante groups."

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