

Jerusalem mayor halts ramp renovation, but disputed dig goes on: Excavations at holy site

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The mayor of Jerusalem has suspended renovations near a compound housing the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque, while the municipality works on submitting new plans for a walkway leading to the holy site.

Mayor Uri Lupolianski announced the suspension of work to the damaged ramp, which has sparked anger among Muslims over what they call a “criminal attack.” Lupolianski has called for a longer and more transparent planning process that will allow residents to see plans for the walkway and submit protests.

However, the decision will have no effect on archaeological work under way at the site, a spokesperson for the mayor said. In Israel it is mandatory for an archaeological dig to be carried out on any building or construction site at a location that could contain historic artifacts.

Arab leaders and Muslim clerics claim that the excavations could damage the foundations of Islam’s third holiest site, which is also a symbol of Palestinian national pride. Jews also revere the compound that overlooks Judaism’s Western Wall, which was home to the First and Second Temple.

The heads of Jerusalem churches met Muslim clerics and leaders February 10 after clashes the day before on the Temple Mount after prayer. The Muslims said that Israeli soldiers stormed the Haram al Sharif, throwing stun grenades and using tear gas to force those gathered to leave, an official of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land told ENI.

The discussion centered on how to keep holy sites protected, respected and accessible to all who wish to pray there. The Web site of the church quoted Muslim leaders as saying they had been in discussion for three years about this reconstruction of the Mughrabi gate area.

The church’s Web site said that for Palestinians—both Muslim and Christian—“this is one more example of a unilateral action that disrespects them and their rights, and is unnecessarily provocative at a time fraught with tension over Palestinian infighting and possible new beginnings of the new unity government.”

On February 11, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert said it was his government’s responsibility to conduct an archaeological dig that will precede the rebuilding of a pedestrian ramp leading to the Mughrabi Gate.

“There is no religious issue here,” Olmert noted, saying “Arab extremists” were inciting violence. The existing ramp, he said, “is a dangerous structure that must be renovated,” and the work is being done “in an area that is totally and completely under Israeli responsibility and day-to-day administration.”

Protests erupted after Israel began work outside the compound. The new walkway is meant to replace an ancient ramp that partially collapsed following a snowstorm and earthquake three years ago.

Since 2004, the ramp, mainly used by tourists to access the compound, was replaced by a temporary timber structure while discussions were held on what permanent structure would take its place. It is expected that the excavations could last as long as eight months.

More than 30 protesters and Israeli police officers were injured February 9 during clashes over the excavations. About 200 Israeli police, wielding batons, used stun grenades and tear gas to disperse a group of protesters who threw stones at them at the plaza outside al-Aqsa Mosque. —*Ecumenical News International*