

Church closure highlights millennium tension in Holy Land

NAZARETH, Israel (AP) — The gates of churches across the Holy Land swung shut in protest yesterday as church leaders made a final attempt to block the building of a mosque in the heart of Nazareth, the town of Jesus' boyhood.

The two-day, Vatican-backed closure highlights the increasingly volatile relations between Christians and Muslims, as well as Israel's ambiguous — some

claim politically tainted — role as mediator.

The dispute has also spilled over into Mideast peace talks, with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat backing the Christians in Nazareth in hopes they will support him when he negotiates the future of Jerusalem with the Israelis.

Saudi Arabia, the guardian of Islam's holiest mosques, supported Arafat's efforts, offering to pay for

a new mosque at an alternate spot in Nazareth, away from the Basilica of the Annunciation, to avoid friction.

The church closures, just weeks before the last Christmas of the millennium, left many pilgrims disappointed. Some endorsed the protest, while others said Christians should set examples of tolerance and not block construction of the mosque.

"Nazareth should be a city for everyone," Joseph

Wietiers, 54, a Roman Catholic who has traveled more than 2,400 miles since May on a pilgrimage from his hometown in Oss, Holland, only to find the Basilica closed, said.

But the highest Roman Catholic authority in the Holy Land, Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, said Christians, a tiny minority of about 100,000, must take a stand.

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