

Pope completes controversial journey to Bethlehem

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Journeying to the cradle of Christianity on Wednesday, Pope John Paul II knelt at the traditional spot of Jesus' birth and kissed a golden bowl of Palestinian soil — a highly charged gesture seen by Palestinians as a recognition of their dreams for statehood.

As a beaming Yasser Arafat looked on, the pontiff proclaimed Palestinians' "natural right to a homeland" and visited a camp for refugees exiled from their homes since the 1948 Mideast War. Soon after he left, Palestinian frustrations turned violent: Hundreds of camp residents hurled stones at baton-wielding Palestinian police in a battle that lasted for nearly half an hour.

Police at the Dheisheh camp pushed the protesters back, but then retreated under a hail of rocks. Some minor injuries were reported in the melee, a show of dissatisfaction with Palestinian leadership and the slow pace of peace. Earlier in



POPE JOHN PAUL II

the day, John Paul called for international action to end Palestinian suffering.

"Your torment is before the eyes of the world," he declared. "And it has gone on for too long."

However, the day in Bethlehem — the city John Paul said was at the heart of his pilgrimage — also had a strong spiritual note. In Manger Square, near Jesus' traditional birth grotto in the Church of the Nativity, a golden-clad pontiff leaning on a silver staff celebrated Mass before thousands of faithful.

Later, he descended into the grotto and knelt before the star marking the spot where Mary is believed to have given birth. In the soft glow of candles, the pope sat in silence as his aides respectfully slipped out of the grotto.

Despite the Vatican's portrayal of the papal trip as purely spiritual, the pope touched on contentious issues of clear consequence to the region. He kissed a bowl of Palestinian soil — a gesture normally reserved for sovereign states — and walked hand-in-hand in Dheisheh with Arafat, the Palestinian leader. The Palestinians, in turn, lost no time driving home the message of their aspirations of independence.

"Welcome to our land," Arafat told the pope at a formal reception that kicked off the only day the pope was spending in Palestinian territory. He called the pope an "esteemed guest of Palestine, and its eternal capital, Jerusalem."

Israel claims all Jerusalem as its capital, while Palestinians want the city's eastern section as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

After meeting Arafat, the pope traveled in his bulletproof popemobile to Manger Square for an ecstatic welcome. Along the route, Palestinian girls hurled flowers, festooning the hood of the popemobile. In the square, draped with Palestinian and Vatican flags, shouts of "Viva Baba!" rang out. Baba is the Arabic adaptation of the word pope.

Clad in a golden robe, John Paul waved his hand in greeting and blessed the crowd, saying "Peace be upon you" in Arabic. As organ strains signaled the start of Mass, he leaned heavily on his silver staff, bowing his head in solemn prayer.

Hands trembling as he preached from a tent-like altar between an ancient church and a modern mosque, the pope said Bethlehem lay "at the

heart" of his millennium pilgrimage — a visit he had hoped to make as far back as Christmas 1978, two months after he assumed the papacy.

"This is a place that has known the yoke and the rod of oppression," John Paul said. "How often has the cry of innocents been heard in these streets?"

As the pope finished his homily, the Muslim call to prayer rang out from a mosque in the square, the first such interruption of a papal Mass. The crowd and the pontiff alike waited silently for the call to prayer to end. A few fidgeted uncomfortably, and a nun shook her head in apparent disbelief.

A moment later, the crowd applauded when Jerusalem's Latin Patriarch, Michel Sabbah, spoke of the juxtaposition of Islamic and Christian prayers as symbolizing unity between the two faiths. Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls later said the overlapping of prayers in the square was "mutual and respectful."

Earlier, the Palestinians greeted John Paul with conscious symbols of statehood as his Israeli Blackhawk helicopter touched down under chilly gray skies near Arafat's presidential palace. The Palestinians presented him with a golden

bowl of soil, to which the pontiff brought to his lips. Along with the Vatican anthem, he played the Palestinian national song.

In his arrival speech, the pope said "legitimate Palestinian aspirations need for peaceful negotiations to reach a just solution."

"The Holy See has always recognized the Palestinian people have a natural right to their homeland," the pope said, speaking in a voice — a symptom of Parkinson's disease — a progressive neurological disorder.

Navarro-Valls parried suggestions that the pope was endorsing a Palestinian state, saying the state has not yet been proclaimed and that the Vatican would consider the issue when that time came.

The visit sounded a cheerful note, one of several hundred, gathered in a courtyard boys' school, cheered and applauded as Arafat and the pope walked hand-in-hand on the way to the grotto.

But the violence erupted after they left. Abdel Rahman Ahmar, a leader of a militant faction, said the camp's anger was directed at Arafat and at the Israeli-Palestinian peace process from which he said refugees have reaped

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Activists criticize water forum's joint declaration

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Activists criticized a joint declaration by water officials from 130 countries Wednesday because it didn't classify access to water as a human right, and lacked any concrete measures to ensure a clean world water supply.

In their four-page closing declaration, government officials at the Second World Water Forum agreed that every person should have "access to enough safe water at an affordable cost."

"If you say it's a human right you change the whole framework," said Maude Barlow of the Canadian Council, a civil rights interest group. "Then you can't trade it [water] as a commodity and make a profit."

Officials discussed recommendations from the 4,500 environmentalists, business people, scientists and water experts attending the conference, but did not endorse them.

They listed challenges for their own governments to address, such as securing food supplies, protecting ecosystems and managing risks including floods, drought and pollution.

"It's a shame the governments have not adopted the most simple pledge," said Lisa Borre, vice president of Mon-

itor International, an American organization promoting the protection of water resources.

The officials stressed the need for institutional, technological and financial innovations "from the private sector."

Some delegates at the forum fear that the declaration will promote the privatization of water, the experts said. "Poor people are being invited to profit from the private sector," said Mike M... of Wisconsin school does groups to fight "The Justice to charge a program if the program by M. Ken... The am... the mandate who said th... to contribut... Had the... leges and u... had to stop... groups or fi... to those stu... Liberal

Director General of the South African Department of Water Affairs Forestry.

"We are democratically elected governments and cannot leave a majority of our people."

With the world's population expected to double in the next 25 years, many experts believe the funding needed for water will have to come from private investors.

The water congress was billed as the largest meeting ever of experts and government officials. The second world water forum will be held in Japan in 2003.

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