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JORDANIAN GOVERNMENT CANCELS CHRISTIAN CELEBRATION

Evangelicals' Millennium Event Called Potential 'Provocation'

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct (02.05.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (03.05.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Jordanian government abruptly withdrew permission last week for its evangelical Christian community to hold a three-day "Third Millennium and Easter Celebration" slated to open tomorrow in Amman.

The May 3-5 event had been granted full permission by the interior minister to take place in the ancient Roman amphitheater in downtown Amman. The 6,000-seat venue would have hosted a variety of daytime exhibitions, along with evening rallies featuring guest speakers and musicians from Korea, Sweden, Lebanon and Jordan.

"We wanted to promote Jordan as the cradle for many Biblical sites," said Rev. Afeef Halasah, head of the Nazarene Church in Jordan and coordinator for the cancelled celebration. The unprecedented event, expected to attract some 18,000 to 20,000 people daily, was co-sponsored by local Protestant churches in Jordan.

A special pavilion called "Jordan through the Bible" had been planned to depict the nation's major role in biblical history, including such popular sites as the massive rock-carved city of Petra, Mount Nebo, the Dead Sea and Jordan River, and the excavated Decapolis city of Jerash. Other features were to have been a Christian book exhibition, a handicrafts fair, special children's programs and multiple showings of the documentary "Jesus" film.

Some 100 invited guests from abroad included the former prime minister of Norway, members of the U.S. Congress and the German Parliament and the South Korean ambassador to Jordan, Halasah said.

After Interior Minister Nayef el-Qadi had given his formal permission for the event on February 2, Halasah said, all the arrangements had been made through the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and officials at the amphitheater.

Halasah said his staff members went to the governor's offices in Amman on April 19 to check on details of formal police protection for the event, when they were told that permission to hold the event had been cancelled.

Shocked, Halasah promptly went in person to meet with Governor Qufdan Majali. The Amman official explained that "security-wise" such an event could not be held in an open, public place. When Halasah proposed that an alternative place be considered, the governor admitted, "I have nothing to do with this. You go to the interior minister yourself."

Halasah promptly did so, but since the interior minister was away, the director of his offices promised to get an official response back to the pastor within two days. Three days later, on April 24, Halasah got a written refusal from El-Qadi, stating that it was "not safe" to hold such an event in the amphitheater or other public places because it would "provoke other religious parties."

Still refusing to take "no" for an answer, Halasah asked the governor for permission to transfer the celebrations to the Cultural Center. But he was handed a final letter of refusal on April 26, declaring that the event could not be permitted anywhere outside church premises.

Halasah said he has since confirmed that the police had been informed in March that the event would not be allowed. "But nobody told us," Halasah said. "They did not even notify us."

Halasah said that Jordan's evangelicals had been "cheated" out of their millennium celebration. "They gave me the approval, waited a few days before it took place, and then called it off," he told Compass. "We had already spent \$5,000 printing up the tickets and other literature for it." The event's projected budget exceeded \$50,000.

"This is supposed to be a democratic country," he noted. "The Catholics had an open-air meeting with the pope," he said, recalling the mass led by Pope John Paul II in an Amman sports stadium on March 21. "Nobody said to them, 'No, you cannot do this.' Yes, we are evangelicals, but we are Jordanians too, and we have equal rights like any other person in the country."

Halasah said that Governor Majali telephoned him yesterday, saying that unnamed "high officials" had informed him that the evangelical churches were going on with their plans to meet in the amphitheater.

"I gave you my word," Halasah said he told the governor. "You cancelled it, so I called it off. But you will bear the responsibility for it. Many international figures were invited, and when they ask me why it is cancelled, I am going to tell them it is because the governor of Amman and the minister of the interior decided at the last minute to call it off."

One of the more moderate Arab Muslim states, Jordan strictly prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the free exercise of religious belief and worship by its citizens.

An estimated six percent of the national population are Christian, the majority of whom belong to Catholic or Orthodox confessions. Although some local Protestant denominations have official government recognition, the Baptist, Free Evangelical, Nazarene, Assemblies of God and Christian and Missionary Alliance churches are registered under the Justice Ministry as "societies."

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