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Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, delivers his homily while celebrating Mass in Rome to formally take possession of his titular church, the Church of St. Onuphrius on the Janiculum, May 1, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Judith Sudilovsky

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Jerusalem â?? June 26, 2024

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Church leaders in Jerusalem accused local Israeli authorities of launching a "coordinated attack" against the Christian presence in the Holy Land after several municipalities initiated legal proceedings for alleged municipal tax debts.

"We follow with concern this campaign against the Churches and the Christian community in the Holy Land, which has reached an unprecedented level, dragging the Churches into legal proceedings from north to south. In response we assert our historical and legal rights, which Municipal actors are now trying to violate," they said in a letter addressed to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Christian leaders â?? including Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, and Franciscan Father Francesco Patton, the custos, or guardian, of the holy places â?? noted that "for centuries" since Ottoman times, church properties have been exempt from municipal taxes according to the established status quo and have used this right to invest in services to benefit their communities including schools, hospitals, convents, churches and houses for the elderly among others.

Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III, Armenian Apostoli Orthodox Patriarchate Nourhan Manougian and Anglican Episcopal Diocese Archbishop Hosam Naoum also signed the letter.

The church leaders called the actions "tendentious" and contrary to the historical stance of the churches and their relationship with the authorities, "violating existing agreements and international commitments that ensure the rights of the Churches."

"It is an outrage that, specifically at these sensitive and complicated times when patience, compassion, unity in prayer and hope should prevail, municipalities are opening cases against Churches in courts and making threats," they said in the letter. "This constitutes contempt of our customs and that which is dear to us, while

trampling the mutual respect, which existed between us until this time."

In early 2018 a similar dispute with municipal tax authorities in Jerusalem led to the closing of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for three days before the Israeli government set up a negotiating team to resolve the property tax disagreement after the intervention of Netanyahu, who was also prime minister at the time.

At the time the Jerusalem municipality said it was aiming to collect close to \$190 million in property taxes from some 887 church-owned properties that it said were not houses of worship.

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In their June 18 letter the churches said the recent legal proceedings are contrary to the previous arrangement reached and accused the authorities of attempting to "drive the Christian presence out of the Holy Land."

According to the church leaders' letter, the municipalities of Tel Aviv, Nazareth and Ramla have also sent churches warning letters for alleged municipal tax debt.

In a statement sent to OSV News, the Jerusalem municipality said that though according to the law, every building is subject to property tax, places of worship may submit an application to the local authority to receive an exemption. However, it said, in recent years the churches have not submitted applications for exemption and also refused to allow municipal inspections in the mentioned premises.

"So far the municipality refrained from collecting the debts and currently a dialogue is taking place with the churches to collect debts for the commercial properties they own," the municipality said.

The Tel Aviv municipality told OSV News it grants full or partial property tax exemption to properties held by religious institutions in accordance with the municipal property tax ordinance and government property tax ordinance.

"It should be emphasized that the Tel Aviv municipality conducts respectful dialogue with all religious institutions in the city to arrange payments according to all legal provisions," the municipality said in its statement.

The church leaders appealed to Netanyahu as their "last hope" to find a "sustainable resolution" as was promised in 2018 thanks to his intervention to avoid "another unwanted crisis." They emphasized what they said was the importance of the prime minister's previous statements on the need to respect the Christian community.

"We call on you to do all that is in your power to direct these local municipalities to cancel all legal proceedings against the churches and any other collection procedures. We want you to understand that in the face of this reality, we as Christian leaders cannot sit idly by and act as if everything is fine," they said.