

## VATICAN-ISRAEL MEETING SEEN AS POSITIVE

### Joint Statement Contradicts Negative Media Report

VATICAN CITY, DEC. 11, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- "Cordiality" and "mutual understanding" -- and not "crisis" or "breakdown" -- was how a joint Israel-Holy See statement described the most recent round of talks between the two sides.

A communiqué released after Thursday's meeting of The Bilateral Permanent Working Commission between the Holy See and the State of Israel noted that the meeting "took place in an atmosphere of cordiality and mutual understanding."

The online Israeli newspaper Yedioth Aharonoth, however, reported otherwise. Quoting Daniel Ayalon, Israel's deputy minister of foreign affairs and chairman of the Israeli delegation at the commission's plenary meeting, the news agency reported that the talks had taken a step backward.

"It is absolutely possible to say that there is a certain crisis," Ayalon said. "There is a feeling that we have gone back, and that, in effect, all the conclusions that were reached by working teams before the meeting have been cancelled."

Sources contacted by ZENIT noted that the "tone and content" of the joint statement released today contradicts what was reported by Yedioth Aharonoth.

The sources added that the fact that the commission programmed another meeting next month -- Jan. 7 -- is a good sign that both sides are committed to advancing negotiations.

The communiqué reported that the plenary agreed to guidelines for further work to be done on the agreements, which deal mostly with taxation and issues of ownership of more than 100 Church properties.

The delegation of the Holy See was directed by Monsignor Ettore Balestrero, sub-secretary of the relations with states for the Secretariat of State.

Since signing the Fundamental Agreement in 1993, which established diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Israel, the two sides have been negotiating the particulars of tax exemptions and property rights for the Church, in particular for the holy sites. Talks stopped altogether for several years, and began again in 2005.

The next plenary meeting is set for May 27 in the Vatican, while the next working session will take place Jan. 7.