

Jubilee in the Holy Land

Pilgrimage of the Century Includes Top Government, Religious Leaders

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

Nearly 1000 Armenians from around the world gathered in the Holy Land during the week of January 17-24 to celebrate the bi-millennial jubilee of Christ's Nativity in Bethlehem. The celebrations were headed by the top leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church with the participation of Armenian President Robert Kocharian, who led a 30-member state delegation to Palestine and Israel for the occasion.

Dubbed "Jerusalem 2000," the event was the first large-scale Armenian pilgrimage to the Holy Land in modern history. There are records that pilgrims from historical Armenia visited the holy places as early as the first few centuries of the common era. However, the

tradition declined after the beginning of the Arab-Israeli wars in the late 1960s.

"This pilgrimage was significant from the viewpoint of Armenian history," said Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan of Istanbul and all Turkey. "As far as I know, the Catholicos of All Armenians and the Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Istanbul had never been together before in the Grotto of the Nativity, and that, on the feast of Christmas." The presence of the president of independent Armenia at the religious services in Bethlehem made the occasion even more significant and added to the symbolism.

The national pilgrimage to observe Armenian Christmas (according to the Julian calendar, on January 19) also boosted the morale of

the tiny Armenian community in Jerusalem, numbering about 1500. Some 650 Armenian pilgrims from the US, the Netherlands, Turkey, Jordan and other parts of the world participated.

The pilgrimage was Catholicos Garegin II of All Armenians' first pontifical visit abroad. It started in Jordan where, in an audience with Jordan's King Abdullah, he received the Kawkab Medal of the First Order. Patriarch Torkom Manoogian of Jerusalem, Bishop Vahan Topalian of Amman and Royal Court Chief Fayez Tarawneh were also present. The King thanked the Catholicos for making Jordan his first stop, assuring him that the Jordanian Kingdom would "continue to nurture equality and justice and be an example of

Left to right: Patriarchs Mutafyan, Manoogian, Catholicos Garegin II, President Kocharian, with President Arafat.



a society with enduring fraternal relations.”

Appreciating the King’s “care for the Armenian community in Jordan,” Garegin II said, “It is because of this sincere guardianship that Armenians in Jordan have been able to prosper, keep their language, faith and traditions and become loyal citizens of this country.”

Garegin II and his delegation also met Jordanian Prime Minister Abdur Ra’uf Rawabdeh and the 4,000-strong Armenian community in Jordan.

From the East Bank, the Catholicos and his entourage, accompanied by Patriarch Torkom, traveled to the West Bank and were greeted by nearly a thousand pilgrims and clergymen at Jerusalem’s Jaffa Gate, the entrance to the Old City leading to the Armenian Patriarchate Road.

A solemn and colorful procession was led to the Armenian Patriarch with the participation of ecumenical guests and various Christian leaders of Jerusalem. The last time a similar grand entrance to the Old City by the Supreme head of the Armenian Church took place was 25 years ago, when Catholicos Vazken I had come for the opening of the Alex Manoogian Theological Seminary in 1975.

On Christmas Eve, January 18, the Catholicos, the two Patriarchs, 12 archbishops,

dozens of monks and priests and hundreds of pilgrims formed a long procession into the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The Catholicos celebrated the Divine Liturgy on the site believed to be the place where Christ was born.

The same evening, the Armenian hierarchs and President Kocharian and his delegation attended a reception and dinner in their honor at the Palestinian Presidential Palace in Bethlehem, hosted by Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. After an exchange of greetings, Arafat conferred the Palestinian State Medal of the Second Millennium to the three Armenian religious leaders.

At midnight, the Catholicos and the Patriarchs led Presidents Kocharian and Arafat into the Church of Nativity, for an hour-long candlelight vigil service.

On Christmas day, as is customary, Palestinian, Israeli and Armenian state delegations paid congratulatory visits to the Church leaders at the Armenian Patriarchate in the Old City, which was followed by an official dinner honoring President Kocharian in the refectory of St. James Monastery.

President Kocharian met with Prime Minister Ehud Barak and President Ezer Weizman, who gave a luncheon in honor of the

Armenian President. Kocharian and his delegation also paid a visit to the Hebrew University where they were greeted by the University Rector and the head of the Armenian Studies Program as well as the chairman of the Armenian Students Organization. During his meeting with students and faculty, Kocharian praised the importance of the Armenian Studies Program and discussed possible cooperation between the Hebrew University and institutions in Armenia. Catholicos Garegin and Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan also visited the University.

Earlier, on January 13, Patriarch Mesrob attended a benefit concert in Tel Aviv organized by the Israeli-Turkish Friendship Association in support of the victims of the August 1999 earthquake in Turkey. The following day, Turkish Consul General in Jerusalem, Ethem Tokdemir, hosted a reception honoring Patriarch Mesrob at the Orient Palace in Bethlehem, attended by diplomats, civic and religious community leaders.

For the Armenian Church, which is one of the custodians of the centuries-old Holy Places in Palestine and Israel – along with the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches – Pilgrimage 2000 was a landmark religious and national celebration. ■

Catholicos Garegin II at the center of the public procession to the Jerusalem Patriarch.

