

Wall casts shadow over Bethlehem

BY MARK MACKINNON

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2005 POSTED AT 7:55 PM EST

BETHLEHEM, WEST BANK -- These should be the most festive of times in what is, for many, among the holiest of places. Instead, the mood in Bethlehem in the lead-up to Christmas has had a pall cast over it by the latest growth in what residents here loathingly refer to as "the wall."

"Look around. It's just a few days before Christmas and there's not 10 people in Bethlehem," sighed Naser Alawy, a souvenir vendor, waving his hand around a deserted Manger Square.

After four consecutive holiday seasons blighted by the bloody *intifada*, residents here had been hoping for an influx of tourists this Christmas season to boost the city out of its prolonged economic slump.

Tourism across the quasi-border in Israel has increased dramatically this year as the violence ebbs, and Bethlehem was beginning to see the benefits of that in recent months.

More and more pilgrims were making the 15-minute drive south from Jerusalem to the city where, according to the Bible, Jesus Christ was born.

But on Nov. 15, Israel sealed one of the last remaining gaps in the eight-metre-high concrete wall it is building along Bethlehem's northern border.

Pilgrims trying to reach the holy city were directed to cross through a new system of passport checks, iron turnstiles and metal detectors.

Individual travellers are now often forbidden from taking their vehicles inside Bethlehem, and are forced instead to cross on foot through a massive bunker that resembles a bomb shelter in shape, before hailing a taxi on the other side.

Tour groups on buses only have to show their passports to enter, but upon returning to Israel must cross on foot through the bunker and pass the airport-style security. There's no apparent wheelchair accessibility.

"If Mary and Joseph were here today, they would go through the checkpoint just like everybody else," Sister Erica, a nun, complained to a reporter last week after making the crossing.

Based on anecdotal evidence, tourism in Bethlehem, already at a low ebb, has taken a fresh hit since the new checkpoint began operating. Many shop owners in the city said last week that business was so bad that they wouldn't bother opening until right before Christmas Day. Hotel owners complained that tourists who had made reservations to stay overnight in the city were returning to Jerusalem ahead of schedule, worried they would have trouble crossing back into Israel if they stay too long.

"It's a tragedy. People shouldn't be building walls here, they should be building bridges," said Xavier de Dumast, a 45-year-old French pilgrim who recently visited the Church of the Nativity. "I was here five years ago, and it was alive, people were everywhere. Now it's completely dead. It's a prison."

The checkpoint is actually situated well inside the Bethlehem governorate, slicing about 750 acres of agricultural land away from the city. Everything on the other side, including thick olive groves that numerous Bethlehemites depended on for their livelihoods, is now considered by Israel to be part of an expanded Jerusalem.

A section of the security barrier juts deep into Bethlehem so that Rachel's Tomb, a site holy to Judaism as the resting place of Jacob's wife, is on the Israeli side of the wall, making it easily accessible to tourists and effectively annexing it to Israel.

Under the 1994 Oslo Accords, Rachel's Tomb and the entire Bethlehem governorate were supposed to be under full Palestinian control.

The Bethlehem security terminal is the first to open of 16 such crossings that Israel plans to build in the highly controversial, 680-kilometre-long West Bank barrier. The others are supposed to be ready by early 2006.

Israel says the new security measures are necessary because, although Bethlehem has a reputation as one of the quieter parts of the West Bank, suicide bombers from other parts had taken advantage of the old, relatively loose crossing at Bethlehem to reach Israeli cities.

Highlighting that the city is not as calm as it often seems, masked gunmen last week took over Bethlehem city hall, which sits right on Manger Square, in a dispute over unpaid salaries.

"The reason why we have the security fence and the crossing there is strictly for security alone. A much lower level of attacks has come from Bethlehem since the fence was built there," said Israeli police spokesman Mickey Rosenthal.

However, under pressure from Christian groups and tour operators -- and aware that they risked a public-relations disaster -- the Israeli military announced on Dec. 19 that it was temporarily easing the crossing by requiring only randomly selected tourists to go through the new terminal.

The lighter regime would apply only until the end of the Christmas season, an army spokesman said, when the stricter rules would be re-applied.

The Vatican was among those who complained. In his traditional pre-Christmas press conference, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in the Holy Land, said the wall around Bethlehem had turned the city into a "big prison."

A Palestinian Authority official keeping tabs on the number of foreign tourists in town said less than 100 people passed through the church's three-foot-high front entrance on the day Mr. de Dumast was there, well below the normal daily range of 200 to 800 tourists.

Jack Elias, owner of the Star Hotel in Bethlehem, blames the new security measures for the loss of a group of 70 Czech tourists that left his hotel just four days into a seven-day reservation. He said his guests told him they felt uncomfortable feeling so sealed off from Jerusalem and the airport in Tel Aviv.

"In the future, tourists will only visit for the day. They will not stay overnight in Bethlehem," Mr. Elias predicted.

On the main shopping street connecting Manger Square to the Milk Grotto chapel, only two of 25 souvenir stores on one stretch were open on the same afternoon. Nearly every family in Bethlehem is in some way reliant on the tourist trade for income, so the economic blow has been a heavy one for the city's 30,000 residents.

Despite the gloom, Manger Square was nonetheless decked out with glowing stars and images of Santa Claus. The mayor said he is planning a celebration in spite of it all.

"This is for the citizens of Bethlehem, so that they enjoy Christmas like anywhere else, and to tell the tourists to come to Bethlehem and enjoy the holy city," said Mayor Victor Batarseh.

But for all his attempts at good cheer, he confessed the situation was becoming increasingly desperate. "We need tourists, we need pilgrims to come to Bethlehem," he said plaintively. "We need them to break this wall, not with violence, but with their mass crossings."