

THE POPE IN THE HOLY LAND THE UPROOTED; Pope Tells Palestinians of His Empathy, but Words Go Untranslated - The New York Times

# THE POPE IN THE HOLY LAND: THE UPROOTED; Pope Tells Palestinians of His Empathy, but Words Go Untranslated

By [DEBORAH SONTAG](#)

MARCH 23, 2000

In his speech here today, Pope John Paul II articulated a more empathetic understanding of the hardships of refugee life than many Palestinians had heard for quite some time.

But, as he talked of their deprivation, many of the refugees who had been invited to hear the pope in a school courtyard here milled about, chatting, as if he were not expressing the core of their cause.

The pope's speech was in English, and Palestinian officials failed to provide a translation into Arabic. So the pope's piercing words -- "Above all, you bear the sad memories of what you were forced to leave behind" -- sailed over their heads into the chill of the afternoon.

Later, when they learned what they had missed, several refugees said that if they had understood, the pope's words would have been drowned out in cheers.

"I guess we were there as props," said Abu Mohammad, 51. "Our leaders see us as a political issue. Maybe the pope understands us better."

Indeed, tensions within the camp erupted in violence shortly after the pope left. Clashes broke out between camp residents, who said the police had been harassing them all day, and Palestinian officers, with scores of youths throwing stones and the police firing into the air. The police stormed a few houses and made some arrests. Led by Fatah, the political faction of Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, residents flooded into the streets, demonstrating against the police.

The conflagration continued for hours. A day that residents had been calling memorable even before the pope arrived, a day that capped months of mounting excitement, ended in a conflict that soured earlier enthusiasm and brought a widespread disappointment to the surface.

"The pope came to visit us, but the people unfortunately didn't have the opportunity to meet him," said a tall, bearded young man whose hand was bandaged where it had been hit by a stone.

Almost 10,000 Palestinian refugees, nearly all Muslim, live on less than one square mile of land here, crowded into concrete shacks that line alleys dotted with junked cars, stray coils of wire and trash. They have been refugees for 52 years, and many of them still keep the keys to the homes they fled or were forced to leave in the fighting surrounding the creation of Israel, parading them through town occasionally, as they did on Tuesday, in a warm-up for the pope's visit.

Whatever Mr. Arafat says, the refugees fear that their cause has been forgotten during the peace negotiations with Israel. Residents here said that Mr. Arafat's visit was almost as much of a novelty as the pope's.

Palestinian officials insist that the refugees' right of return is an absolute prerequisite for a final agreement. But it is widely believed here that the negotiators are pushing for a principle -- for Israel to recognize the right of return -- rather than the return itself. Refugees fear they will be sold out.

The pope's visit, then, held different meanings for Mr. Arafat and for the refugees themselves. For Mr. Arafat, it was part of the package, a papal recognition of Palestinian suffering that went hand in hand with his recognition of Palestinian nationalist aspirations.

For the refugees, even if the pope spent but 29 minutes in their camp, it was a chance not only to showcase their plight to the world, but to recapture the attention of their own leaders.

"May it send a strong message not only to the world, but to our own negotiators and to our local officials," said Hisham Ahmed-Fararjeh, a camp resident and political scientist who is blind and leaned on the arm of an aide. "The pope cares about us. Now you can no longer neglect and forget to deal with this issue -- a ticking time bomb in the Middle East."

On the political level, the pope did not explicitly endorse the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their former homes, to the disappointment of some Palestinians.

And, instead of appealing specifically to Israel, he called generally on "leaders in the Middle East and in the international community as a whole" to help solve the refugees' problems.

But on a human level, he voiced the refugees' concern even if he spoke generally and in a way that might also apply to short-term refugees elsewhere and not specifically to Palestinians who have been exiled for decades.

"I greet each one of you," the pope said, to the uncomprehending crowd. "And I hope and pray that my visit will bring some comfort in your continuing plight."

"You have been deprived of many things which represent the basic needs of the human person: proper housing, health care, education and work," he said. "Above all, you bear the sad memory

of what you were forced to leave behind, not just material possession, but your freedom, the closeness of relatives, and the familiar surroundings and cultural traditions."

The refugees were uprooted three generations ago, and for many camp residents, this is the only familiar surrounding they have known and their traditions are still deeply Palestinian. If they did not understand the pope's words, the compassion in his voice registered with them. Several older women, wearing traditional embroidered dresses and holding framed pictures of sons who had died for the Palestinian cause, ululated as he spoke.

It was a dream setting for the Palestinian cause. The school courtyard was strung with Palestinian, Vatican and United Nations flags, its walls painted with powerful images of their struggle: a boy wearing a hood and holding a rock, a girl crying behind barbed wire, a prisoner.

Near the school, as the pope took a brief tour, smiling women waved from decorated balconies. Political graffiti was addressed directly to him, in broken English: "Sorry Pope! We will not call any of the alleys of our camp after you. Camps can't last forever."

But up the hill, where the decorations ran out, the setting was less picture perfect. The streets were deserted, many windows shuttered, and the atmosphere was tense following an earlier conflict between residents and the police. Security officials ran on each side of the pope's car, hands on their guns, eyes darting. Few residents cheered.

Once inside the schoolyard, the pope sat beside Mr. Arafat under a banner that said, "The right of return is a sacred right." To their left, another banner showed the crescent and the cross, the symbols of Islam and Christianity, united.

Mr. Arafat did not speak. But after the pope finished his speech, the Palestinian leader leaped nimbly to his feet and led the audience in applause. He was beaming.

Outside, a couple of young men commented to each other that they had not seen so many people gathered in the streets of the camp since the days of the Palestinian uprising against Israel, "the days of the clashes and the martyrs," they said.

Not long after, today's violence broke out.