

RIGHT OF REPLY Israel

I wish I had the time to answer all the allegations we heard this morning, but I will confine myself to three points.

First, the freedom of worship and access in Jerusalem. In 1967, Israel adopted a law of protection which stipulates that "all holy places shall be protected from desecration and any other violation and whosoever desecrates or otherwise violates a holy place shall be liable to imprisonment for a term of seven years."

Israel has always been committed to the safeguarding of sites which have cultural, religious or historical significance. Perhaps if the Palestinians had similar values, they would have prevented the destruction of Jewish shrines such as Joseph's Tomb in 2000. Or they would permit Israel to restore all the synagogues they burned in Gaza after Israel's complete withdrawal from that territory in 2005.

Only last Friday, during Ramadan prayer services, there were 95,000 worshippers present on the compound. Can this be considered a "restriction of access?"

As for the alleged excavations this issue is in the hands of the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO and should remain as such.

I am waiting for the day when the Palestinians and Arab State will have the courage to adopt a law to protect all holy places in their midst. as we did more then 40 years ago.

Regarding Reverend Tutu. He doesn't need permission from Israel to go to Beit Hanoun. Beit Hanoun is in the Palestinian Territories under the control of the Hamas terrorists. Anyone could—and can still—go to Beit Hanoun through the Egyptian border. Reverend Tutu was offered this possibility but declined it for personal reasons.

As for the Israeli Cabinet decision to declare Gaza a hostile territory,
Let me be very clear about it: every Israeli action is subject to humanitarian considerations, and Israel is committed as ever to abide by its humanitarian obligations. But no country in the world would consent to maintain normal commercial and economic relations with a territory controlled by a terrorist entity which regularly shells and indiscriminately targets innocent civilians in a neighboring state.