

# UNESCO lists Church of Nativity as world heritage; Palestinians hail 'historic' move

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UNESCO's World Heritage committee has voted to approve a Palestinian bid to place the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, worshipped as the birthplace of Jesus, on its list of sites of World Heritage in Danger.

The Palestinians had pressed to have the church and pilgrimage route inscribed as an emergency candidate at the meeting of the World Heritage 21-nation committee in St. Petersburg, Russia.

UNESCO spokeswoman Sue Williams said the committee voted 13-6 on Thursday to put the iconic Christian site on the list. Two nations abstained, The Associated Press reported.

Emergency status for the candidacy meant the Palestinians could take a shortcut to getting the church on the list.

Some nations saw the move as an attempt by the Palestinians to mix politics and culture. The United States and Israel opposed.

The U.S. delegation to UNESCO said it was "profoundly disappointed" while stressing that "this body should not be politicized."

The Palestinians, meanwhile, hailed the UNESCO decision as a "historic day for justice."

"This global recognition of the rights of the Palestinian people is a victory for our cause and for justice," president Mahmoud Abbas's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP, as Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat called it "a historic day."

"These sites are threatened with total destruction through the Israeli occupation, through the building of the separation wall, because of all the Israeli sanctions and the measures that have been taken to stifle the Palestinian identity," the Palestinian delegate said after the vote.

The Israeli delegate said the Jewish state supported awarding world heritage status to the ancient church under a completely different procedure that carried no implications for the Middle East peace process.

"The decision taken now was totally political and does great damage in our opinion to the (U.N.) convention and its image," the delegate said.

The bid, the first since the Palestinians won controversial membership of UNESCO in

October 2011, was submitted “on an emergency basis” because the Palestinians say urgent restoration work is needed.

Their membership has cost the body tens of millions of dollars in lost funding from the United States, Israel’s staunchest ally.

Israel said the “emergency basis” status essentially meant that the United Nations as a world body was backing the Palestinian view that the church was threatened by the Jewish state’s troops.

It had proposed co-sponsoring the church’s application at a future date -- an idea whose prospects seem remote amid a continuing stalemate in the grueling Middle East peace process.

The Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian Churches for their part have only given lukewarm approval to the idea because of the dangers the move potentially poses to their own rights to the shrine.

The Palestinian bid had faced serious hurdles, including the continued opposition from the United States and Israel, a negative report from the body that evaluates sites for UNESCO and, reportedly, domestic disagreements.