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By Jack Khoury

President Shimon Peres is urging the government to yield control of key Christian holy sites to the Vatican, a position believed to be opposed by Interior Minister Eli Yishai.

The Vatican's longstanding demand that Israel transfer sovereignty of key Christian sites to the Holy See has created dissension among senior officials in Jerusalem.

The Interior Ministry has vowed to retain control of the sites, calling relinquishment a "sacrifice" of Israeli sovereignty.

"This matter is under the minister's authority, and he is not prepared to sacrifice Israeli sovereignty, even if it is only symbolic," Yishai's spokesman Roi Rachmanovitch said.

Peres is pressing the government to agree to the Vatican's request that Israel surrender control of six religious sites, among them the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth; the Coenaculum on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where Jesus is said to have held the Last Supper; the Gethsemane, which sits at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem; Mount Tabor; and the Church of the Multiplication, which hugs the Kinneret's shore.

Peres is lobbying Yishai to concede the sites to the Catholic Church, Army Radio reported, but not all officials agree.

"If we were sure that this great gift to the Christian world would bring millions of Christian pilgrims here, then we would have a good reason to think about [agreeing to the demand]," Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov told Army Radio. "But since we are not certain that this will happen, why should we hand out gifts?"

The dispute between Jerusalem and the Holy See threatens to cast a pall over next week's visit to the Holy Land by Pope Benedict XVI. Vatican officials have made clear they intend to reiterate their demand during the visit that Israel hand over control of the Coenaculum, Army Radio reported.

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