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Mid-East 'place of hope and fear' for Christians

By Judith Sudilovsky
Catholic News Service

ALMOST a year after the eruption of the Arab Spring uprisings, the Middle East is a place of hope and fear for Christians, said Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona.

Bishop Kicanas, chairman of the board of the US bishops' Catholic Relief Services, was in Baghdad late last year and visited Egypt prior to his arrival in Jerusalem this month for the annual Holy Land Co-ordination meeting with bishops from the US, Canada and Europe.

"There is a fear among the Christians (in Egypt) whether they will be given human rights and whether they will be treated as equal citizens. There is a sense of wait and see," he told Catholic News Service on 11 January.

While there is hope for the creation of a new, equal society with a progressive economic situation, there are still concerns whether Egypt's newly elected government with its Islamist majority would put restrictions on the rights of minorities in Egypt, he said.

And in the Holy Land, he added, while people continue to be hopeful for a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, they are frustrated by the inability of their leaders to reach an accord.

"There is the tension between the needs of the people and the bickering of the politicians," he said.

The Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land joined the bishops in their opening session on 9 January and during the four days of meetings the bishops met Church leaders as well as Israeli and Palestinian political leaders. They also met Christian parishioners in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel.

In Gaza, Christians spoke of a feeling of abandonment by world church communities, said Bishop Kicanas, noting the "astounding inequality" between the lives of people in Gaza, where some 56,000 people are unemployed, and of people living in Israel.

He said that in Egypt, Iraq and the Palestinian territories, Christian organisations and religious orders play a vital role in supplying much-needed educational, medical and child care.

"Hopefully this will create a sense in (these) societies that we all have dignity and human rights," he said.