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## GENERAL ASSEMBLY SECURITY COUNCIL

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
Thirty-sixth session  
REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO  
INVESTIGATE ISRAELI PRACTICES AFFECTING  
THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE POPULATION OF  
THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

SECURITY COUNCIL  
Thirty-fifth year

Letter dated 23 December 1980 from the Permanent  
Representative of Jordan to the United Nations  
addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to refer to the letter of 4 November 1980 from the Permanent Representative of Israel (A/35/595-S/14243), in which he was unable to find an excuse for his Government's recent criminal attempt to burn the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, nor was he able to explain or deny Israeli policy to destroy Christian and Islamic Holy Places in the occupied West Bank of Jordan.

In discrediting himself, the representative of Israel was only able to state that "fires have occurred from time to time in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as indeed they are liable to occur in any place of worship where hundreds of candles are in use". He claimed that "a devotional candle was accidentally toppled" and as a result the fire occurred and burned the southern part of Saint Gregory Chapel located in the Cave of the Cross and destroyed the priceless painting by Mardiros Altonian.

The following is a true account of the criminal act as it occurred and as witnesses have professed that arson was involved:

"On the night of 14 October, at 10:30 p.m., a telephone call was received by the doorman of the Armenian Patriarchate, when the main gate of the Armenian Convent (of St. James) was already closed.

"The Armenian superior of the Holy Sepulchre, Father Vagharsh Hatchadourian, called to raise the alarm that a fire was raging at the St. Helena Chapel in the Holy Sepulchre. At the same time, he had asked for help from the Greek Orthodox superior of the Holy Sepulchre, Father Daniel.

"The dormitory of the Armenian superior is in the upper gallery, in the Armenian church facing the calvary, quite far from the crypt. The smoke was so dense that it had reached the superior while he had already turned in, on the other side of the church, and three levels above the chapel.

"The chapel is the oldest part of the church, the only remnant from the Constantine period, when the cathedral was first constructed (circa 330 A.D.). It has been reconstructed twice in the present century, once in 1937, and again last year. It is situated under the roof, part of the Ethiopian Monastery.

"Now that the reconstruction work is still proceeding, excavations were done on the same level, under the Coptic Monastery, behind the altar of the St. Helena Chapel, where excavators unearthed the remains of the Constantinian walls and many other important vestiges of the fourth century A.D.

"The Armenians have jurisdiction over this chapel and have named it the Church of St. Gregory, the Illuminator, the founder of the Armenian Church (A.D. 301). All the paintings and mosaics depict the life of St. Gregory.

"It is in the southern part of this chapel that the scaffoldings and wooden beams are stored. They have been there since excavation and rebuilding work was begun. The fire broke out there.

"When the Armenian Father superior alerted the Patriarchate, two priests and a layman rushed to the place. They went first to the Kishla (citadel) police station, notified them of the fire and asked to call the fire brigade. When they reached the entrance of the chapel, a heavy pall of black smoke was coming up the stairs. After some hesitation, and in the absence of the fire brigade, the two priests and the layman connected the fire-extinguishing pump, which is the main level of the church, and, hoisting the hose onto their shoulders, braved the smoke and walked down the steps, in an attempt to extinguish the fire.

"The fire was under control by the time the fire brigade arrived. However, the damage had been done. The main large painting in the chapel was completely destroyed, the huge arch supporting the roof was heavily damaged and all the area was a tragic mess.

"The priests and the officials of the fire brigade discovered these important facts:

1. That the beams were burned in the centre, where they lay on the floor of the church, and then spread upwards;
2. There were old rags under the beams, and remains of matches;
3. No remains of candles were found, as was claimed later.

/...

"The fact is that no police investigation or any other official action was initiated after the fire. The representatives of the Municipality came the next day to ask if any help was needed and to suggest that it was all the result of a candle left there by a pilgrim.

"The truth is that there were no pilgrims or worshippers in the church that night. The gates were closed at 7:00 p.m. as usual, and the Franciscan fathers had been in the area around 9:00 p.m. without noticing any lighted candles in any place.

"The scaffoldings and the wooden beams have never served as a place where candles could be lit.

"The witnesses are convinced that arson was involved. Somebody put the cloth rags under the heavy and bulky pieces of wood and lit them. The fire spread very rapidly and engulfed the invaluable painting high above the spot where it started.

"Who the criminal was, who started that fire, we cannot say at this stage. But it was most definitely a criminal act."

I respectfully request Your Excellency to use your good offices in calling upon the Government of Israel to abide by the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 <sup>1/</sup> and relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council on the protection of holy shrines and cultural institutions in occupied areas.

I kindly request that this letter be circulated as an official document of the General Assembly, under the agenda item entitled "Report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories", and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Hazem NUSEIBEH  
Ambassador  
Permanent Representative

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<sup>1/</sup> United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 75, No. 973, p. 287.