

**'Gov't making Christian pilgrimage harder'**  
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Malaysian Christians are complaining that government regulations are making it harder than ever to for them to make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

According to a report in the Wall Street Journal website, Christians used to have little problems visiting the holy city in Israel via travel agencies for the purpose of pilgrimage.

However, since lifting a 2009 freeze on travel to Israel in 2011, various restrictions were put in place that hinder travellers.

The report details complaints of how travellers to Israel now have to apply through their respective churches, where each is only allowed a quota of 20 pilgrims.

Prior to 2009 there were no quotas and involvement of the churches in making a travel application.

The government, said the report, did not feel their regulations were problematic.

"We are not making it difficult for them to go to Jerusalem to do their pilgrimage. I don't see (the conditions) as difficult," Home Ministry officer Wan Muhammad Rumaizi Wan Hussin was quoted saying.

Churches must show proof pilgrims are Christians

Another way restrictions were reportedly tightened was for churches organising pilgrimages to show proof the pilgrims are Christians by sending copies of birth certificates or church memberships cards to the Home Ministry.

Previously, a cover letter to the Immigration Department saying that the pilgrims were Christians was sufficient proof.

The report also states that Christians were unhappy about the need to inform the government what they do during the pilgrimage, including where they pray and stay.

Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) general secretary Reverend Hermen Shastri is quoted as saying they would not accept these impediments put before the churches, including the quota on the pilgrims per trip.

Shastri is also reported to have said that the Malaysian government was "always shifting the goal posts".

Christians have been the target of controversies in recent years, with some promoting a conspiracy theory that Christians groups were working to usurp Islam as the official religion and others alleging a concerted effort by them to convert Muslims.