

US governor cancels tunnel visit

by Sumana Ramanan

THE Governor of the American state of New Jersey, Christie Whitman, canceled her visit to the controversial Hasmonean Tunnel in East Jerusalem due to "severe back problems". Whitman, however, visited the Golan Heights, another potentially controversial gesture, as planned.

Whitman was in Israel on a week-long visit starting Thursday, November 7, to promote trade relations between her home state and Israel. She was scheduled to visit the tunnel Wednesday, November 13, as part of a tour of the Old City, but called off the entire tour on Tuesday.

The opening of a new exit of the archaeological tunnel in East Jerusalem by the Israeli government in September this year sparked off several days of violent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers. Many Palestinians viewed the opening as a provocative move by Israel to consolidate its control over Jerusalem. Israel accused the Palestinians of exploiting the issue to extract concessions from Israel in the continuing negotiations.

Palestinian observers suggest that protests from several Arab-American associations and the fear of reviving a controversy may also have prompted Whitman to change her mind. When asked if this was the case, a close aide of the governor told *The Jerusalem Times* that the cancellation was entirely due to medical reasons. The aide pointed out that Whitman suffered from a chronic back prob-

lem, and that the strain of the visit had exacerbated an already fragile condition.

The cancellation nevertheless came as something of an anti-climax since Whitman had announced her intention to go ahead with the scheduled visit despite sharp criticism from Arab-Americans. A local New Jersey newspaper reported James Zogby, the president of the Arab-American Institute, as saying, "This would indicate that she endorses a very provocative move made by the Israeli government...the opening of the tunnel in the midst of very sensitive negotiations aimed at achieving a lasting peace."

Whitman's advisers insisted her trip was purely trade-related and

that it had been very successful. They said several Israeli firms planned on starting manufacturing plants or distributing subsidiaries in New Jersey.

Arab-Americans, however, felt the planned visit to the tunnel introduced a political dimension to the trip, seeing it as a political gesture to please the Jewish constituency at home.

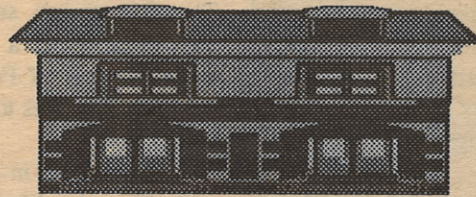
A spokesperson at Orient House, the Palestinian body that deals with Jerusalem, said he had no idea that Whitman was even in the country. That Whitman's schedule did not include a single meeting with a Palestinian official, was also interpreted as an affront by Arab-Americans. Zogby called her visit "one-sided".

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