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Jericho Lesson For Medvedev On Stealing

By The Moscow Times

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President Dmitry Medvedev visited the West Bank city of Jericho on Tuesday for talks with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas aimed at kick-starting the stalled Middle East peace process. But Medvedev would do well to also use his stop in this ancient biblical city to consider a lesson in fighting corruption.

In Jericho stands a gnarled, 2,000-year-old sycamore tree that offers a stiff rebuke against extortion. Curiously, the tree is owned by Russia.

Medvedev saw the tree Tuesday at the Jericho Museum, a $3 million complex recently built by the Russian government on land owned by the tsars and returned to Russia in 2008.

Medvedev, a self-proclaimed Russian Orthodox Christian, no doubt knows the legend that the 20-meter tree is the very one that Jericho's top tax official Zacchaeus climbed to get a view of Jesus in Roman-controlled Jericho in the first century A.D.

What Medvedev may not know, however, is that his Russia faces one of the same problems as Zacchaeus' Jericho — runaway corruption.

As the biblical account goes, Zacchaeus drew widespread contempt among Jericho residents because he built a fortune through extortion and fraud. Then one day, Zacchaeus scrambled up the sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus over the heads of a crowd. So great was his delight when Jesus noticed him and later dined at his home that he exclaimed, "Look Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Luke 19:8, NIV).

Growing public contempt over bureaucrats' use of extortion and fraud to enrich themselves is the very problem that helped initiate Medvedev's crackdown on corruption.

Now it is nearly impossible to imagine a traffic police officer pulling over a driver and saying: "You remember that 100 rubles that I took from you? I'm sorry. And to show I mean it, here's 400 rubles." But there is something to be said for the inherent justice of a sincere apology followed by fair restitution. This is particularly important for top government officials and leading businessmen who profess to be followers of a holy, just and merciful God and like to demonstrate — especially for the cameras — their piety.

Medvedev spoke last week about steep fines, prison sentences and bans from public office to combat corruption. While an apology cannot be forced, he should consider adding restitution to the list.

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