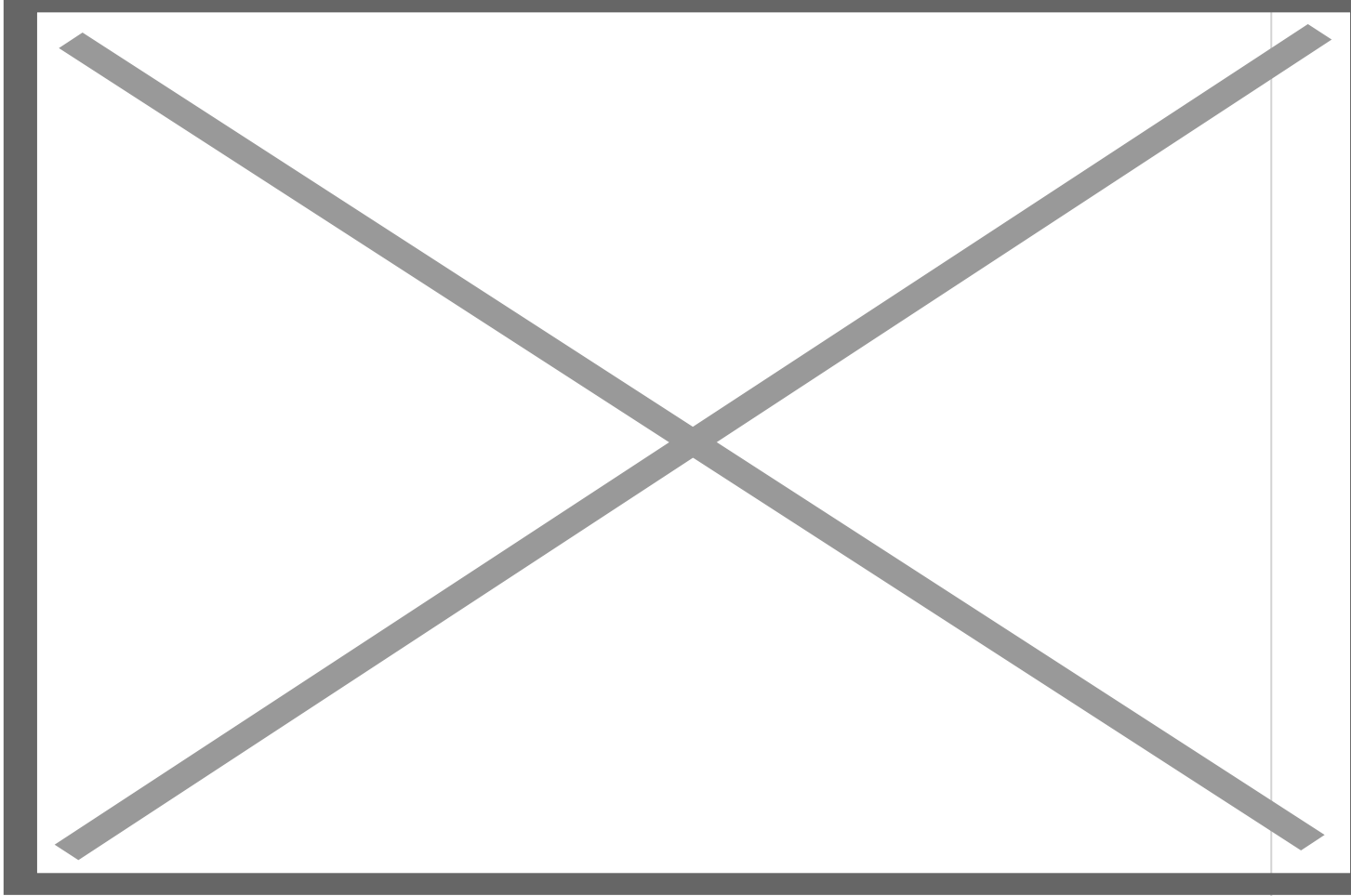


Pope Francis calls for silence of arms and warns of grave situation in Gaza

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Pope Francis delivers his traditional Christmas Day Urbi et Orbi speech and blessing from the main balcony of Saint Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, on December 25, 2024 [Yara Nardi/Reuters]

The Vatican, December 26 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has denounced the "extremely grave" humanitarian situation in Gaza while appealing for the release of captives and a ceasefire in the war-torn coastal

enclave.

In his Christmas “Urbi et Orbi” (to the city and world) address on Wednesday at the Vatican, Francis also appealed for peace in Ukraine and Sudan.

“I think of the Christian communities in Israel and Palestine, particularly in Gaza, where the humanitarian situation is extremely grave. May there be a ceasefire, may the hostages be released and aid be given to the people worn out by hunger and by war,” he said.

Israel has killed at least 45,361 Palestinians in its war on Gaza and wounded 107,803 since October 7, 2023, the day a Hamas-led operation was launched into Israel during which 1,139 people were killed and about 200 were taken captive. Israel’s purported “retaliation” has displaced nearly the entire population of Gaza and left much of the enclave in ruins.

The 88-year-old, celebrating the 12th Christmas of his pontificate, called for an end to conflicts, political, social or military, in places including Lebanon, Mali, Mozambique, Haiti, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

“I invite every individual, and all people of all nations ... to become pilgrims of hope, to silence the sounds of arms and overcome divisions,” the pope said.

Speaking from the central balcony of Saint Peter’s Basilica to thousands of people in the square below, the pope said: “May the sound of arms be silenced in war-torn Ukraine.” He also called for “gestures of dialogue and encounter, in order to achieve a just and lasting peace”.

Pope Francis was criticised by Ukrainian officials this year when he said the country should have the courage of the “white flag” to negotiate an end to the war with Russia.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had previously ruled out engaging in peace talks without the restoration of Ukraine’s pre-war borders. But Zelenskyy has shown an increasing willingness to enter negotiations in the weeks since Donald Trump’s re-election as US president.

Earlier in December, Zelenskyy raised the idea of a diplomatic settlement that would involve a “freezing” of the current battle lines and the deployment of foreign troops in Ukraine. Russia has demanded that Ukraine abandon its ambitions to join the NATO military alliance.

The head of the Catholic Church also extended his call for a silencing of arms in Sudan, which has been ravaged by 20 months of brutal civil war where millions are under the threat of famine.

“May the Son of the Most High sustain the efforts of the international community to facilitate access to humanitarian aid for the civilian population of Sudan and to initiate new negotiations for a ceasefire,” he said.

Earlier this week, a United Nations-backed global hunger-monitoring group said famine was spreading in Sudan. The war began in April 2023 when long-simmering tensions between the military and paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces exploded into open fighting in the capital, Khartoum, before spreading to the rest of the country.

The conflict has been marked by atrocities, including ethnically motivated killings and rapes, according to the UN and human rights groups.

The International Criminal Court is investigating alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.



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