A man walks by the debris of a cultural center and an administration building destroyed durin

A man walks by the debris of a cultural center and an administration building destroyed during aerial bombing, as Russia's advance on the Ukrainian capital continues, in the village of Byshiv outside Kyiv, Ukraine, March 12, 2022. (CNS photo/Thomas Peter, Reuters)

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VATICAN CITY — Russia's war on Ukraine "seems to have changed" the world, said Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state.

Since the invasion Feb. 24, the bombings and battles have sent millions of refugees fleeing, led several countries to consider increasing military spending and raised the specter of the use of nuclear weapons.

"In the face of what is happening in Ukraine, many people are talking about rearmament: New and huge sums of money are being allocated to armaments, the logic of war seems to prevail, the distance between nations is increasing," Cardinal Parolin told Vatican News March 12.

The cardinal quoted Pope Francis' statement at Hiroshima, Japan, in 2019: "The use of atomic energy for the purposes of war is immoral, just as the possession of atomic weapons is immoral."

"War is madness, it must be stopped," the cardinal said. "We ask, appealing to the consciences of all, that the fighting cease immediately."

While Russian President Vladimir Putin has claimed the invasion of Ukraine is a "military operation," not a war, to protect his country, Pope Francis insisted March 6, "It is not merely a military operation, but a war, which sows death, destruction and misery."

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"Words are important," Cardinal Parolin said, "and to define what is happening in Ukraine as a 'military operation' is to fail to recognize the reality of the facts. We are facing a war."

The results of war are clear, he said: the deaths of civilians, "women, elderly people and defenseless children who have paid with their lives for the folly of war"; the destruction of cities, leaving people with no electricity, food or medicine; and the fleeing of some 2.6 million refugees — mostly women and children — to neighboring countries.

"Over the last few days, I have come across a group of them, who have arrived in Italy from various parts of Ukraine: blank stares, faces without smiles, endless sadness," Cardinal Parolin said.

"We would have to possess a heart of stone to remain impassive and allow this havoc to continue, as rivers of blood and tears continue to flow," he said. "War is a barbarity!"

The pleas of Pope Francis and other religious, civic and government leaders and what the cardinal called the pope's "unprecedented" decision to go in person to the Russian Embassy to the Holy See to beg for peace seem to have had little impact, Cardinal Parolin said.

"War is like a cancer that grows, expands and feeds on itself," he said. "It is an adventure with no return, to use the prophetic words of St. John Paul II."

Catholic social teaching recognizes "the legitimacy of armed resistance in the face of aggression," he said. But the world still must ask, "Are we doing everything possible to reach a truce? Is armed resistance the only way forward?"

"Unfortunately, we must recognize that we have fallen into a vortex that can have incalculable and ill-fated consequences for everyone," the cardinal said. "When a conflict is underway, when the number of defenseless victims grows, it is always difficult to turn back."

But stopping the war is not impossible, he said. "We must not give in to the logic of violence and hatred. Nor must we give in to the logic of war and be resigned to it, extinguishing any glimmer of hope."

"We must all together cry out to God and to mankind to silence the weapons and restore peace, as the pope is doing," Cardinal Parolin said.