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A crowd gathers in a plaza in front of a steepled church. Other people watch from apartment

People gather outside the Maronite Cathedral of St. Elijah in the earthquake-stricken Aleppo, Syria, on Easter, April 9, 2023. (OSV News photo/courtesy of Maronite Catholic Diocese of Aleppo)

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In their Easter messages, Catholic patriarchs of the Middle East encouraged the hope of the Resurrection to triumph over suffering in the region.

Lebanese Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite patriarch of the Maronite Catholic church, lamented the economic, social and political crisis crippling Lebanon. The national currency has depreciated by more than 98% since 2019, plunging more than 80% of the population into poverty in the once middle-income country.

Lebanon's deeply divided parliament has continuously failed to agree on a new head of state since President Michel Aoun's six-year term ended late October. Under Lebanon's power-sharing system, the post is held by a Maronite Catholic.

Without a president or a full-fledged government, the Lebanese authorities are stalling in adopting the reforms needed to stem the economic and financial collapse.

In his message from Bkerke, the patriarchate north of Beirut, Rai challenged the country's officials, saying, "Don't you feel ashamed?!"

The head of the Maronite Catholic church called for a "resurrection of the heart" so that those responsible would "pass from a state of sin to a state of grace."

Otherwise, he warned, the officials would "remain preoccupied with the destruction of the state, the destruction of its institutions," and the "undermining of the future of its promising generations," continuing emigration of Lebanese "to the four corners of the world."

Rai added: "Whether you, officials in the ministries, fulfill your duties that justify the reason for your presence in government, or not, the church will cling more and more to its conscientious duty to serve those whom the Lord Jesus called His 'little brothers' (Mt 25: 40), in order to secure their rights and protect their dignity."

The Maronite cardinal also cited "the presence of 2.3 million displaced Syrians" in Lebanon from Syria's war, noting that the refugees have exhausted the state's assets "and race with the Lebanese for a living," stressing that the international community "protects them at the expense of Lebanon for apparent and hidden political reasons."

Rai encouraged the faithful: "We are sons and daughters of the Resurrection," reminding them of "the Christian hope, (that) Christ has risen to make all things new."

In his Easter message from the patriarchate in Beirut, Syriac Catholic patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan likewise denounced Lebanon's officials for the country's collapse.

"These corrupt people persist in obstructing the work of the political, constitutional and administrative institutions, and destroy the hopes of the Lebanese youth to remain in their homeland and build their future in it," he said.

"We deplore the willful failure of officials in general, and parliamentarians in particular, who have turned a blind eye to what is dictated to them by sense, conscience and national dignity," the patriarch said, urging to "stop their wrangling

and maneuvers," "immediately elect a president" and "form a national government that implements the necessary reforms," so that Lebanon "can return to the international map, and to its previous era of development and prosperity."

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The Syriac Catholic patriarch recently returned from a patriarchal visit to the Diocese of Mosul, Iraq, which was conducted during Holy Week and included a Palm Sunday procession in the streets of Qaraqosh with the participation of thousands of believers who had been uprooted by the Islamic State in the summer of 2014.

"We pray that the officials will continue their work to build peace and harmony between the various components, so that efforts are combined for the return of dear Iraq to its stability and prosperity," Younan pleaded.

"As for Syria, which has been suffering from crises and wars for years, how can we not feel or be in pain because of the horrific earthquake and aftershocks that hit it, especially in Aleppo and the northwestern regions!" Younan said, in reference to the February catastrophe.

The head of the Syriac Catholic church recalled his visit to Aleppo following the earthquake, in which he witnessed "some of the consequences of this disaster, the massive destruction it caused, the loss of family and loved ones, and the psychological and physical wounds it left behind, along with intense fear and anxiety."

"With this natural calamity and the pain and suffering it carried, we felt the sincerity of solidarity and collaboration among all citizens without distinction or discrimination," the patriarch stressed.

"With the glimmer of hope looming on the horizon heralding the openness of Syria regionally and internationally, we ask God to protect it from terrorism and evils, and to bring together citizens with sincere reconciliation so that together they can achieve reconstruction, peace and stability," Younan, a native of Hassake, Syria, said.

He urged the faithful: "Let's throw off the weight of our human worries … renew our complete trust in Jesus … and become faithful witnesses to His Resurrection."

Joseph Tobji, Maronite Archbishop of Aleppo, told OSV News, "Our Christians in Aleppo, even though they are tired from all the disasters they have experienced, and lately the earthquake, filled the churches by the thousands on Good Friday and Easter.

"Indeed, this feast which profoundly marks the Christian life, cannot pass without a special meaning this year, a sign of hope and joy in feeling united all together around the Risen Christ," Tobji said.

"The church does an enormous job in the reconstruction and repair of damaged houses and buildings, in the distribution of aid of all kinds, because the economic situation has become unbearable, and above all, after the earthquake," Tobji told OSV News.

"On behalf of all the bishops and religious leaders and Christians in Aleppo, I thank all those who have healed our wounds with their charity," he said, wishing them "a Holy Easter that brings peace to the whole world."

From Baghdad, Iraq, Cardinal Louis Sako, patriarch of Chaldean Catholics, stressed the "firm hope" of the Resurrection that "comforts us amid the difficult times that we Iraqi and Eastern Christians are constantly living through. It gives us the ability to stand firm and face harassment with patience and confidence."