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Pope Francis stands in his apartment window and raises his right hand as he speaks into a mi

Pope Francis gives his blessing to visitors in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican after praying the Angelus Aug. 13, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — August 14, 2023
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After leading the recitation of the Angelus prayer Aug. 13, Pope Francis again assured the people of Hawaii of his prayers.

With some 15,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square to pray with him, the pope said he was praying "for the victims of the fires that have devastated the Hawaiian island of Maui."

The official death toll from the fires had risen to 96 Aug. 13 and the number was expected to increase as the search through burned out rubble continued.

In his public prayers and appeals after reciting the Angelus, Francis also made a strong appeal for serious efforts at immigration reform after 41 migrants were reported to have drowned in the Mediterranean in early August.

"Another tragic shipwreck happened a few days ago in the Mediterranean -- 41 people lost their lives," the pope said. "I have prayed for them."

Four migrants from Africa were rescued by a merchant ship and brought to the Italian island of Lampedusa Aug. 9. They said they were on a boat carrying 45 people that capsized off the coast of Tunisia; using inner tubes and other makeshift flotation devices, they reached an abandoned boat adrift, only to discover it had no motor. They were rescued by a cargo ship and transferred to the custody of the Italian coast guard.

"Sadly and shamefully," Francis said, "we must say that since the beginning of the year, almost 2,000 men, women and children have already died trying to reach Europe. This is an open wound on our humanity."

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The pope said he wanted to offer his encouragement and support to "the political and diplomatic powers that are trying to heal this in a spirit of solidarity and fraternity," and he praised "the dedication of all those who are working to prevent shipwrecks and are aiding migrants."

Francis also used the occasion to offer his support to a pilgrimage for peace Aug. 14, the eve of the feast of the Assumption, in Cameroon, which is "still afflicted by violence and war."

"Let us unite ourselves in prayer for our brothers and sisters of Cameroon so that, through the Mary's intercession, God might sustain the hope of the people who have been suffering for years, and open paths of dialogue so that peace and harmony might be achieved," the pope said.

Since 2016, militias in the country's two English-speaking regions have been fighting to break away and form a new nation they call Ambazonia.

Also Aug. 12, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, sent a message of condolence and concern to the archbishop of Quito, Ecuador, after the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio.

"In the face of the suffering caused by the unjustifiable violence, which he condemns unreservedly, His Holiness calls upon all citizens and political forces to unite in a

common effort for peace," the cardinal said.