News

A group of brown men look sorrowful. Two carry infants wrapped in white. Blood is visible on

Mourners carry the bodies of twin Palestinian babies, Ossayd and Mohammad Abu Hmaid, during their funeral in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip Oct. 8, 2023. Health officials said they were killed along with their mother and three sisters in Israeli strikes. (OSV News photo/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa, Reuters)



Judith Sudilovsky

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Jerusalem — October 9, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem united in a call for peace and justice amid unfolding violence, following a surprise attack by Hamas in southern Israel, which has left over 700 Israelis dead, among them civilians and dozens of soldiers and police who were killed battling the Hamas fighters. Over 2,000 people were injured. Israeli media said that more than 250 bodies had been recovered from the site of the music festival that was attacked by Hamas fighters on Oct. 7 in southern Israel.

Fears of a ground invasion of Gaza are growing after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to turn the besieged Palestinian enclave into a "deserted island," while the latest reported death toll of Palestinians is 511. Thousands of people in Palestinian territories are injured in Israeli airstrikes, which began hours following the Hamas attack.

During the Angelus prayer on Oct. 8, Pope Francis said he was "following apprehensively and sorrowfully what is happening in Israel where the violence has exploded even more ferociously, causing hundreds of deaths and casualties."

He appealed: "May the attacks and weaponry cease. Please!" crying out that "terrorism and war do not lead to any resolutions, but only to the death and suffering of so many innocent people." The Holy Father stressed that "War is a defeat! Every war is a defeat!" He also asked for prayers for peace in Israel and Palestine.

"The Holy Land, a place sacred to countless millions around the world, is currently mired in violence and suffering due to the prolonged political conflict and the lamentable absence of justice and respect for human rights," The Patriarchs and Head of the Churches in Jerusalem said in an Oct. 7 joint statement.

As custodians of the Christian faith, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches said they "stand in solidarity with the people of this region, who are enduring the devastating consequences of continued strife."

"We unequivocally condemn any acts that target civilians, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity or faith," said the Patriarchs, among them Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Some countries started to evacuate their citizens from Israel, with some 200 Polish pilgrims and tourists being airlifted from Ben Gurion International Airport in the early morning hours of Oct. 9 by two C-130 Hercules planes that landed at Tel Aviv airport amid rocket strike from Hamas, and the Israeli Iron Dome intercepting rockets from Gaza.

American officials said on Oct. 8 that they were also working through plans to evacuate thousands of Americans from Israel if necessary -- no decisions have been made, according to the New York Times. One option includes placing some Americans on the Navy ships to get them to safety.

Pizzaballa expressed "condemnation" and great concern in an Oct. 7 interview with the Italian Catholic daily newspaper Avvenire.

"We need to stop the violence and then apply diplomatic pressure to prevent the game of retaliation from becoming a vicious cycle from which it is difficult to escape. So [we must] try to bring back a minimum of reasonableness between the parties. Even if it seems difficult right now," said Pizzaballa, who became the first resident cardinal in Jerusalem's history during a Sept. 30 consistory in Rome.

The Latin Patriarchate announced the postponement of all ceremonies to honor the newly created cardinal due to the current situation. The patriarchate also called for all Oct. 8 Masses to be offered for the intention of a ceasefire and an end to the "ongoing war in the Holy Land to prevent further bloodshed, shattering of lives and burial of hopes."

"May all religious leaders work to calm the situation and calm down the spirits. In short, let no one throw fuel on the fire. And I hope for prayers for peace. And already today we will carry out an initiative in this sense in all our churches," Pizzaballa told Avvenire.

Shocked by the unhindered breakthrough of hundreds of Hamas gunmen through the fence barrier, Israelis hunkered down in safe rooms and called to relatives and radio programs whispering terrified messages as they heard the militants breaking into their homes. The attack included the takeover of the police station in the city of Sderot, which was later reclaimed.

The attack took place under the barrage of thousands of rocket attacks, which were largely intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome defense system.

Hamas breached Israel’s security gate in the early morning Oct. 7 and infiltrated dozens of Israel border communities, killing people in their cars and homes and taking others hostage, including several elderly people, a mother with her two preschool-aged daughters, young people and foreign workers. Soldiers were also taken hostage. Social media videos showed captives and bodies of dead Israelis paraded through the streets of Gaza.

One video showed a terrified young woman being pulled by the hair and transferred from one jeep into another by armed Hamas gunmen. In another video, the body of a young man in shorts taken from a kibbutz, a Jewish communal settlement, was paraded through the streets on the back of a motorcycle.

Advertisement

Thousands of young Israelis and foreigners had been celebrating at a nature dance party next to one of the kibbutz, and dozens were murdered by the gunmen as they fled in panic through the desert. Many of the captives had been at the party.

Democrat TV, an independent Israeli news source, reported on their Facebook page that 70 young people who had been reported missing from the dance party arrived in the southern city of Netivot 30 hours after the slaughter began, though the report could not yet be corroborated.

The attack took place on the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, which marks the completion of the annual cycle of reading the Torah scroll. The attack also fell a day after the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the 1973 War, which began with a surprise attack on Israel by a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur, Judaism’s holiest day of the year.

The attack follows a year of increasing violence from both settlers and the Israel Defense Forces after the election of Israel's far-right nationalist government.

For many Israelis, there were moments of terror and desperation as they identified their loved ones on the horrifying videos. One video showed a shrieking young woman speeding away in a motorcycle sandwiched between two gunmen as her boyfriend was led off by others. One shirtless man was led through the streets by the neck as gunmen pushed his head down. Another video showed gunmen sitting on and near the half-naked body of another woman with dreadlocks, later identified as a German national, in the open back of a truck.

Kibbutz residents said it took some eight hours for the Israeli army forces to reach their communities. One mother told Israel radio she and her children were rescued by special forces through the window of their safe room and taken by armed guard to a secured location because militants were still roaming their kibbutz. Another resident speaking by phone on TV news began crying as she told the anchorwoman that men had broken into her home and were trying to get into the safe room where she was.

After the Israeli army and police gathered forces and responded to the attack, the Associated Press reported that Israeli Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari told reporters

“hundreds of terrorists” have been killed and dozens captured.

In the Italian newspaper interview, the reporter noted Pizzaballa's pain at the violence and concern that it would escalate because of the captive Israelis.

"The extension of the attack. And the fact that there are many Israelis kidnapped, civilians too. These are decidedly new elements, also taking into account the context of great mistrust that exists. Of course, I hope I'm wrong, but I fear that the situation will get even worse. There will be retaliation for retaliation," he said.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces also exchanged fire with Hezbollah over the weekend as Lebanon's militant group fired dozens of rockets and shells at Israeli positions in a disputed area along the country’s northern border.

In a TV broadcast, Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant vowed Oct. 7 that retaliation against Hamas would be swift and harsh.

An Oct. 7 U.S. Department of Defense press release said U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III had spoken with Gallant by phone and had conveyed his condolences "for the victims of this appalling, abhorrent terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel," and emphasized his "ironclad support for the Israeli Defense Forces and the Israeli people."

"He also reaffirmed that the Department’s commitment to Israel’s security and its absolute right to defend itself from acts of terrorism is unwavering," the release said.

Israeli politician and former Knesset member Dov Khenin, who served with the left-wing Joint List party, called for moderation on both sides and urged for a change of direction in an Oct. 7 Facebook post.

"Today’s events are heartbreaking. A terrible attack on civilians in their homes is an inconceivable crime," he said. "The next days will be trying days. We must not let people who want us to hate each other forever [succeed]. … Without a changing of direction we are doomed to continue living the horrors of today. Two nations live in our country, and if we can’t allow them a life of freedom and independence we will never be able to go to sleep in peace. It won’t be easy and won’t happen soon, but only true peace can bring us the security, which is so lacking."

The Patriarchs and Head of the Churches said that it is their "fervent hope and prayer" that all parties involved "will heed this call for an immediate cessation of violence." They also called for dialogue "seeking lasting solutions that promote justice, peace, and reconciliation for the people of this land, who have endured the burdens of conflict for far too long."