Vatican
Vatican News
A man in a bishop's cassock walks with a large group of men between concrete buildings and

Then Cardinal-designate Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, visits the town of Jenin in the Israeli-occupied West Bank July 10, 2023, days after the Israel Defense Forces launched air and ground attacks on the Jenin refugee camp. (OSV News photo/courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

Claire Giangravé

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Vatican City — October 17, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Holy See officials this week rushed to remedy tensions with Israel, which criticized the Vatican's pronouncements on the outbreak of violence in the Holy Land as too impartial and lacking a clear condemnation of Hamas.

On Oct. 13, the Christian Patriarchs and church leaders in Jerusalem, including the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, issued a joint statement that did not openly condemn the actions of Hamas and demanded that Israel avoid the killing of innocents. The Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, Raphael Schutz, harshly criticized the statement on X (formerly Twitter).

"We expect the Holy See to issue an unequivocal and clear condemnation of the murderous terrorist acts perpetrated by Hamas terrorists that caused grievous harm to children, women and the elderly just because they are Jews and Israelis," read a statement by the Israeli minister of foreign affairs, Eli Cohen, on Oct. 15.

The statement — issued after Cohen met with the Vatican official for relations with states, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, to discuss the ongoing conflict in the south of Israel — said it was "inconceivable" that the Vatican would voice concern for the suffering in Gaza without acknowledging the 1,300 killed by the Hamas missile attacks on Oct. 6.

"Israel is fighting a war that was imposed upon it, and will continue to fight Hamas until it no longer poses a threat to the citizens of Israel. This is being done for the benefit of the entire world," the statement read.

Pizzaballa, who was recently made cardinal by Pope Francis, was among the signatories of the statement, but he claimed he was not responsible for drafting the document and voiced his "perplexities" during an online meeting with Vatican journalists on Oct. 16.

"The Israeli foreign ministry is very irritated, and I understand their reasoning," Pizzaballa said. The cardinal also condemned the "barbarism of Hamas as unacceptable and incomprehensible."

Pizzaballa represents the Vatican's interests in the Holy Land and is considered to be the pope's eyes and ears on the situation on the ground. He said there are currently 1,300 Christians in the Northern Gaza Strip seeking refuge in churches who refuse to leave because they don't know where to go. Israel has launched an ultimatum for Gaza residents in the north to evacuate or face retaliation for the attacks of the Hamas militants.

"We are worried about what might happen in Gaza," Pizzaballa said, while adding that so far there have been no casualties among his flock.

Advertisement

The No. 2 official at the Vatican, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, met with the Israeli ambassador on Oct. 13 in an attempt to defuse tensions. After condemning the

"inhuman" attack by Hamas, Parolin said the Vatican "is always available for any mediation," in an interview with the Italian broadcasting network Tv2000 on Oct. 16.

Francis called for an end of "the diabolical hate, terrorism and war" in the Holy Land during his Angelus prayer on Oct. 15, and he also asked that humanitarian corridors be safeguarded to help those fleeing the conflict. "I forcefully ask that children, the sick, the elderly and women, and all civilians do not become the victims of the conflict," he said.

"So many have already died. Please, no more spilling of innocent blood either in the Holy Land or in Ukraine or anywhere else. Enough! Wars are always a defeat, always," he added.

Francis and the Vatican faced similar backlash in February of 2022, when Russian forces invaded Ukraine. At the time, the international community and Ukraine asked the pope to openly condemn Russia as the aggressor. While the pope eventually spoke out against the Russian invasion, he also stressed the importance of dialogue with all parties in promoting peace.

Francis asked the faithful to join Pizzaballa for a day of fasting and prayer for peace in the Holy Land. "It's the only thing we are able to do," the Latin Patriarch said, adding that all Christian denominations are joining in a sign of unity.

Pizzaballa said he is willing to be exchanged with a hostage if necessary. "I would do anything if it would ensure freedom to one of these children and bring them home," he said, adding that resolving the hostage situation is essential to avoid a further escalation of the conflict.

The situation in the Holy Land risks expanding to the entire world, Pizzaballa observed. "In order to have a mediation, you need interlocutors, which are very hard to come by at the moment," he said, adding that, in the current environment of hostility, there is a "great hardness of spirits."

"We are trying to promote listening to one another, but it's not without difficulty," he added.