News

Two women, one with an extremely distressed facial expression, hold each others shoulders v

Women react outside St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza Oct. 20, 2023, after an explosion went off the night before. Several hundred people had been sheltering at the church complex, many of them sleeping, at the time of the explosion. The Hamas Ministry of Interior in Gaza blamed the explosion on an Israeli airstrike but responsibility for it had not yet been independently verified. (OSV News photo/Mohammed Al-Masri, Reuters)



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Jerusalem — October 20, 2023

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An explosion at the St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church campus in Gaza has left the administration building in ruins, and at least 17 people dead, though numbers have not yet been officially confirmed.

Several hundred people had been sheltering at the church complex, many of them sleeping, when the explosion went off the night of Oct. 19. The Hamas Ministry of Interior in Gaza blamed the explosion on an Israeli airstrike but responsibility for the explosion has not yet been independently verified.

On his Facebook page, Latin Patriarchate CEO Sami El-Yousef wrote Oct. 20 that at the time of his writing 10 people had been reported dead and 20 missing, with many more injured. "Our prayers are with our people in Gaza," he wrote. "Please God end this madness now!"

The Latin Patriarchate said on its Facebook page that it "declares solidarity and stands" with its sister Orthodox Church "in these difficult moments."

An AP report quoted Mohammed Abu Selmia, director general of Shifa Hospital, as saying that dozens had been injured in the blast but a precise death toll was not yet available because bodies were still under the rubble.

In an Oct. 19 statement, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem expressed its "strongest condemnation" of what it said was an Israeli attack on the church property.

"The Patriarchate emphasizes that targeting churches and their institutions, along with the shelters they provide to protect innocent citizens, especially children and women who have lost their homes due to Israeli airstrikes on residential areas over the past thirteen days constitutes a war crime that cannot be ignored," said the statement.

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Israeli Defense Forces said in an Oct. 20 statement that on Oct. 19 "IDF fighter jets targeted the command and control center belonging to a Hamas terrorist, involved in the launching of rockets and mortars toward Israel. The command and control center was used to carry out attacks against Israel, and contained infrastructure belonging to the Hamas terrorist organization." IDF said that as a result of the IDF strike, "a wall of a church in the area of the center was damaged," that they were "aware of reports of casualties," review the incident and that the IDF "can unequivocally state that the Church was not the target of the strike."

The explosion came just days after an explosion at the Anglican al-Ahli Arab hospital left hundreds dead with Hamas and Israel trading charges of blame. Following an analysis of the site and other intelligence, Israel determined the explosion was caused by a failed Palestinian Islamic Jihad missile launching from the cemetery behind the hospital complex.

There has been no immediate Israeli response to the explosion at the Greek Orthodox church, but in an earlier release the Israeli Air Force said that since Hamas' initial attack on Israel Oct. 7, killing 1,400, Hamas has "continuously used civilians in the Gaza Strip as human shields, regularly launched barrages of rockets and used civilian compounds for military purposes."

"These rocket launches are carried out from areas adjacent to civilian buildings and compounds such as hospitals, U.N. schools, mosques, restaurants, diplomatic buildings, and hotels," the release said.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate statement said it remained committed, along with the other churches, to "fulfilling its religious and moral duty in providing assistance, support and refuge to those in need." It said it would not heed Israel's warnings to leave the area as Israel continues to carry out airstrikes against Hamas targets.

Eleven Catholic religious have chosen to stay in Gaza to be with the Christians in Holy Family Latin Parish in Gaza City. The religious include two priests from the Incarnate Word congregation, three Incarnate Word sisters from Argentina and Peru, three Missionaries of Charities sisters from India, Rwanda and the Philippines who care for severely disabled children, and three Rosary Sisters from Egypt and Jordan.