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Pope Francis stands in his apartment window and holds a piece of paper above his clear lecte

Pope Francis speaks to visitors gathered to pray the Angelus in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 22, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis called for the release of Israeli hostages held in Gaza and spoke with U.S. President Joe Biden to discuss the humanitarian crisis and the need to de-escalate violence in the region.

"I renew my appeal for spaces to be opened, for humanitarian aid to continue to arrive, and for the hostages to be freed," the pope said after praying the Angelus Oct. 22 with some 20,000 people in St. Peter's Square.

Some 200 hostages were taken into Gaza by Hamas during its coordinated attack on Israel Oct. 7 which killed more than 1,400 people. Two U.S. hostages were released Oct. 20 after negotiations between Qatar and Hamas.

The pope said he is "very concerned" and "grieved" by the situation in Israel and Palestine. "I pray, and I am close to all those who are suffering: the hostages, the wounded, the victims and their relatives," he added.

Francis expressed his concern over "the serious humanitarian situation in Gaza," saying he is "saddened that the Anglican hospital and the Greek-Orthodox parish have also been hit in recent days."

A deadly Oct. 17 blast at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, killed at least 471 people, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza. The militant group blamed the Israeli Defense Forces for the strike, while a spokesperson for the National Security Council said the U.S. government assessed that Israel was not responsible for the explosion.

An administration building belonging to St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church -- one of the oldest churches in Gaza, built in approximately 1150 -- collapsed during an Israeli airstrike Oct. 19. Palestinian officials said that 16 people were killed in the strike.

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"War, any war that there is in the world -- I also think of the tormented Ukraine -- is a defeat," Francis said after praying the Sunday Angelus. "War is always a defeat; it is a destruction of human fraternity."

"Brothers, stop! Stop!" the pope pleaded.

Later in the day, the pope spoke with Biden in a 20-minute phone call to discuss "situations of conflict in the world" and the need to find avenues toward peace, the Vatican said.

In their conversation, Biden "condemned the barbarous attack by Hamas against Israeli civilians and affirmed the need to protect civilians in Gaza," the White House said in a statement released Oct. 22. The president "discussed his recent visit to Israel and his efforts to ensure delivery of food, medicine and other humanitarian assistance to help alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza."

The White House said the two leaders also discussed "the need to prevent escalation in the region and to work toward a durable peace in the Middle East."

Biden traveled to Israel Oct. 18 and had been scheduled to meet with Arab leaders in Amman, Jordan, but the second leg of his trip was canceled.