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Pope Francis gestures as he leads a prayer for peace inside St. Peter's Basilica, at The Vatican, Friday, Oct. 27, 2023. Amid signs of escalating tensions in the Middle East, Pope Francis led special prayers Friday evening in St. Peter's Basilica for a world "in a dark hour" and in "great danger" from what he described as the folly of war. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

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Amid the latest bloodshed in the Middle East, Pope Francis led special Oct. 27 evening prayers in St. Peter's Basilica for a world "in a dark hour" and in "great danger" from what he described as the folly of war.

Francis delivered his remarks in the form of a prayer to the Virgin Mary and didn't mention by name the conflict that exploded when Hamas militants attacked southern Israel on Oct. 7 and Israel retaliated by sealing off the Gaza Strip and battering the Palestinian territory with airstrikes.

He said he was praying for "especially those countries and regions at war," and he pleaded with Mary to "take the initiative for us, in these times rent by conflicts and laid waste by the fire of arms."

"This is a dark hour," Francis said in a subdued voice, in his remarks in the basilica.

Since the Israel-Hamas war started three weeks ago, Francis has appealed for the release of hostages taken by Hamas and for civilians in the Gaza Strip to be spared from warfare. He has also decried the massacre by Hamas of civilians in Israel, at a music concert and in their homes.

The pope has also pressed for humanitarian aid to head off what he said would be a "catastrophe" for civilians after Israel cut off supplies of food, water and fuel into the Gaza Strip following the deadly Hamas incursion.

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During Oct. 27's basilica service, Francis deplored that the human family "has strayed from the path of peace, preferred Cain to Abel, and lost the ability to see each others as brothers and sisters dwelling in a common home." He was referring to the Biblical account of two brothers, one who fatally turns against the other.

"Intercede for our world, in such turmoil and great danger,'' the pope prayed. Francis also prayed that people will learn to care for "each and every human life — and to repudiate the folly of war, which sows death and eliminates the future."

His prayers included one for hearts "imprisoned by hatred,'' as well as an appeal for national leaders to seek paths of peace. He further prayed for a reconciliation for those who are "seduced by evil, blinded by power and hate."

Francis offered no formula for how to defuse the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict that flared anew this month and has fueled anxiety of a wider, regional war developing in the Middle East.

But in a Oct. 26 phone conversation with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Francis expressed hope, according to the Vatican's readout of the call, for two states and a special statute for the city of Jerusalem, with its several sites sacred to faithful of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Francis has also repeatedly invoked peace for Ukraine since Russia invaded the eastern European country in February 2022.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 10-23, 2023** print issue under the headline: Pope Francis prays for a world in ‘a dark hour’ and danger from ‘folly’ of war.