News



A child walks at the site of an Israeli air strike on a house in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip Oct. 27 as the conflict between Israel and Palestinian Islamist group Hamas continues. (OSV News/Reuters/Mohammed Salem)



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Jerusalem — November 22, 2023
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The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, expressed his happiness at the late-night hostage-exchange agreement reached between Israel and Hamas Nov. 21, and said he hoped it would lead to end to the war which broke out after an Oct. 7 Hamas terrorist attack on 22 southern Israeli agricultural communities along the border with Gaza.

"We are happy with the news and hope that this will lead to further positive development that will bring the conflict to a conclusion," said Pizzaballa in a brief statement released to journalists in Italian and English.

The Israeli government said in a statement it was obligated to return all the hostages home and had approved the outline of the first stage of the goal.

According to the agreement, which was negotiated with the help of Qatar, at least 50 Israeli hostages — women and children — will be released over four days, during which there will be a pause in the fighting. The release of every additional 10 hostages will result in one additional day in the pause, they said.

The truce is aimed to begin at 10 a.m. Nov. 23. In the exchange Israel will also allow fuel, medicine and other humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip and will release up to 300 Palestinians — also women and children — held in Israeli prison.

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President Joe Biden welcomed the deal to secure the release of hostages "taken by the terrorist group Hamas during its brutal assault against Israel on October 7th," a Nov. 22 White House statement said.

"Jill and I have been keeping all those held hostage and their loved ones close to our hearts these many weeks, and I am extraordinarily gratified that some of these brave souls, who have endured weeks of captivity and an unspeakable ordeal, will be reunited with their families once this deal is fully implemented," the president said.

"As President, I have no higher priority than ensuring the safety of Americans held hostage around the world," Biden said. He said that the U.S. "national security team and I have worked closely with regional partners to do everything possible to secure the release of our fellow citizens."

The president said the first sign of negotiations was releasing Judith Tai Raanan, 59, and her daughter Natalie, 17, on Oct. 20.

"Today's deal should bring home additional American hostages, and I will not stop until they are all released," the president said.

"Today's deal is a testament to the tireless diplomacy and determination of many dedicated individuals across the United States Government to bring Americans home," Biden stressed.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said Nov. 22 that the U.N. will "mobilize all its capabilities" to support the implementation of the Israel-Hamas truce.

"I welcome the agreement reached by Israel and Hamas. It‘s an important step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done," Guterres said in a statement.

> "They suffer so much. I heard how they both suffer."
>
> — Pope Francis
>
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On Nov. 22, Pope Francis renewed his appeal for prayers for people suffering due to wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land, saying "this is not war; this is terrorism."

The Holy Father recalled his meeting earlier the same morning with two delegations: 12 members of the Israeli delegation at his residence in the Casa Santa Marta and Palestinian delegation in a room in the Paul VI hall.

"They suffer so much. I heard how they both suffer," Francis said. "Wars do that," he stressed, adding that the situation in the Holy land reminded that "here we have gone beyond wars." "This is not war; this is terrorism," he said.

The parents of Israeli hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin, 23, who was among those captured from a desert dance party near the Gaza border Oct. 7 and also holds American citizenship, met with the pope.

"I feel blessed and honored to have had that experience. He was very kind and empathetic," said Rachel Goldberg, who is originally from Chicago. In a video posted on social media, she told the pope: "This is my son," holding up her cellphone to the pope. "No arm — it's been 47 days."

An Israeli television channel read the possible names of hostages to be released Nov. 22, showing pictures of dozens of children — babies, toddlers and teenagers, who could be reunited with their families, but families to whom OSV News spoke say they were told that nothing is for certain until the hostages actually cross the border with Gaza. The list allegedly includes Abigail Mor Idan, the 3-year-old Israeli-American who saw her parents murdered, and was then taken hostage to Gaza.

Abigail's father Roy Edan, 43, a photojournalist, and her mother, Smadar Edan, were murdered Oct. 7. "The one thing that we all hold on to is that hope now that Abigail comes home, she comes home by Friday," the toddler's aunt Liz Hirsh Naftali told CNN Nov. 21.

"Friday is her 4th birthday. We need to see Abigail come out and then we will be able to believe it."



A house burns following an Israeli strike in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, Nov. 7 amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestinian Islamist group. (OSV News/Reuters/Bassam Masoud)

Hamas is believed to have taken 239 people as hostages into Gaza following their incursion. They are mainly civilians, including Israelis, dual-citizens, foreign workers from Thailand, Nepal and the Philippines and two international students from Tanzania.

Some 1,200 people, also mainly civilians, were killed in the terrorist attack — including Israeli Muslim citizens and foreign workers, which Hamas documented in gruesome videos released of that day's atrocities from the terrorists' bodycams.

The ensuing war which has included Israeli air, land and sea assaults has left Gaza virtually in ruins with over 14,100 Palestinians dead according to Hamas, which does not differentiate between civilians and Hamas casualties. Eighteen Christians were killed in an Israeli bombing of a Hamas target which caused a wall to collapse in the compound of the Greek Orthodox church.

In addition, according to the U.N., some 1.7 million people — nearly three quarters of Gaza's population — have been displaced as Israel has continued its attacks for almost seven weeks with its stated purpose of rooting out Hamas and its leadership from the Gaza Strip. Some 386 Israeli soldiers also have been killed in action. Caritas confirmed Nov. 22 that one of its workers, 35-year-old Issam Abedrabbo, widower and father of three, was killed along with two of his children in Gaza. Only his 3-year-old daughter survived.

While some reports are heralding the truce as the first step toward the end of the brutal conflict, Israel has insisted that it will continue the war until all the hostages are returned and that it will "complete the elimination of Hamas and ensure that there will be no new threat to the State of Israel from Gaza."