News

A group of people walk into a stone church. In the middle, four people hold a canopy that cov

A clergyman is pictured in a file photo carrying the monstrance during a Eucharistic procession outside Holy Family Catholic Church in the Gaza Strip. Following a series of attacks on Christians in Gaza by Israeli forces Dec. 16, 2023, including the killing of a mother and daughter at the parish, the Israeli Defense Forces denied claims that it targeted civilians in the Catholic parish. (OSV News photo/Paul Jeffrey)



Judith Sudilovsky

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Jerusalem — December 19, 2023

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Following a series of attacks on Christians in the Gaza Strip by Israeli forces Dec. 16, including the killing of a mother and daughter at a Catholic church, the Israeli Defense Forces said that it "takes claims regarding harm to sensitive sites with the utmost seriousness." However, the statement did not make any mention of the shooting deaths of the two women in the Holy Family Parish premises.

In a heartfelt appeal during an Angelus prayer Dec. 17, Pope Francis called for an end to the "terrorism" of war, condemning the previous day's attack in which -- the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said -- an Israeli army sniper shot and killed Nahida Khalil Anton, and her daughter, Samar Kamal Anton, as they walked to a convent at the Holy Family Parish compound in Gaza. The convent of the Missionaries of Charity also was targeted.

The Israeli Defense Forces said in a Dec. 17 statement, "An initial review suggests that IDF troops, who were operating against Hamas terrorists in the area, operated against a threat that they identified in the area of the church." The Israeli military said it "is conducting a thorough review" of what it called "the incident."

The statement also said the Israeli military received a letter from the Latin Patriarchate Dec. 16 describing a "tragic incident" following explosions heard near the church -- apparently in reference to the rockets mentioned in the Latin Patriarchate's statement.

"During the dialogue between the IDF and representatives of the community, no reports of a hit on the church, nor civilians being injured or killed, were raised. A review of the IDF's operational findings support this," the Israeli military's statement said.

While avoiding language that directly criticized the Israeli military, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said in its Dec. 16 statement the mother and daughter were "murdered."

"One was killed as she tried to carry the other to safety," the patriarchate said, adding that seven more people were shot and wounded while trying to protect others in the church compound.

"No warning was given, no notification was provided," the statement said. "They were shot in cold blood inside the premises of the parish, where there are no belligerents."

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The Latin Patriarchate also said that the same day, an Israeli army tank launched a rocket that targeted a Missionaries of Charity convent that is home to "54 disabled

persons and is part of the church compound, which was signaled as a place of worship since the beginning of the war."

After destroying its generator and fuel resources, the patriarchate said, the tank fired two more rockets that "rendered the home uninhabitable," leaving the displaced persons without a home and "without access to the respirators that some of them need to survive."

Expressing its condolences to the victims and their families, the Latin Patriarchate called the attack a "senseless tragedy."

Francis appealed for an end to a war that is ravaging the Holy Land, praying especially for the Catholic parish community in Gaza, where "unarmed civilians are the targets of bombings and gunfire."

The pontiff emphasized the attack occurred on the premises "where there are no terrorists, but families, children, people who are sick and have disabilities, and nuns."

The Israeli military said, in return, that its "activity is focused against the terrorist organization Hamas and is not directed against civilians, regardless of their religious affiliation."

"The IDF takes many measures to reduce harm to civilians in the Gaza Strip. Despite the complex fighting against a terrorist organization that does everything in its power to endanger citizens and uses them and various religious institutions as human shields for its terrorist activities," the statement added.