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Pope Francis greets the crowd as he leads his Christmas message and his blessing "urbi et or

Pope Francis greets the crowd as he leads his Christmas message and his blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world) from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 25, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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Pope Francis decried the "appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims" in the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, using his annual Christmas Day message to reiterate calls for an immediate ceasefire.

War "is devastating the lives of those peoples," said Francis, as he delivered his Dec. 25 *urbi et orbi* ("to the city and the world") message and blessing, offering particular prayers for the Catholic parish in Gaza where earlier this month, Israeli snipers shot and killed two women and injured seven others.

Francis said his "heart grieves" for what he described as the "abominable" Oct. 7 attack by Hamas against Israel and reiterated his ongoing appeal for a release of Israeli hostages currently being held in Gaza.

At the same time, the pope deplored the "desperate" humanitarian situation in Gaza, where 1.9 million people, or some 85% of the population, are believed to be displaced and more than 20,000 killed. Francis urged an end to the "fueling of violence and hatred" and encouraged the support of the international community to finally resolve the "Palestinian question."

The Holy See has long called for a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine, with a special protected status for the city of Jerusalem.

The pope delivered his traditional Christmas Day address from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica overlooking the square below, where thousands of pilgrims gathered on a gray and overcast Christmas morning at the Vatican, many waving flags of their various homelands.

His remarks come just hours after Israel intensified its assault against Hamas, killing at least 68 individuals, including women and children. Despite the death of at least 15 Israel soldiers in recent days, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to keep fighting.

The pope went on to use his annual address to launch a broadside against all forms of war, saying that it is incompatible with the Christmas message.

"To say 'yes' to the Prince of Peace, then, means saying courageously 'no' to war, to every war, to the very mindset of war, an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly," said the pontiff. "To say 'no' to war means saying 'no' to weapons."

"And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise?," he asked. "Today, as at the time of Herod, the evil that opposes God’s light hatches its plots in the shadows of hypocrisy and concealment."

Francis went on to criticize the use of public funds being spent on weapons, saying that most people are oblivious to this reality.

"That is something they ought to know!," said the pope. "It should be talked about and written about, so as to bring to light the interests and the profits that move the puppet-strings of war."

In addition to the ongoing war in the Holy Land, Francis offered specific appeals for peace in Ukraine, in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the Korean

peninsula and throughout Africa and the Middle East.

"From the manger, the child Jesus asks us to be the voice of those who have no voice. The voice of the innocent children who have died for lack of bread and water; the voice of those who cannot find work or who have lost their jobs; the voice of those forced to flee their lands in search of a better future, risking their lives in grueling journeys and prey to unscrupulous traffickers," said Francis.

Recalling King Herod's "slaughter of the innocents" after the birth of Jesus, Francis lamented that "many innocents are being slaughtered in our world!"

"In their mothers’ wombs, in odysseys undertaken in desperation and in search of hope, in the lives of all those little ones whose childhood has been devastated by war," he continued. "They are the little Jesuses of today."