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A man grieves over the body of an employee from the World Central Kitchen at Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir Al-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip, April 1, 2024. The worker was killed along with six others with the nongovernmental organization including foreign aid workers, in an Israeli airstrike that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu April 2 called "a tragic incident." (OSV News/Ramadan Abed, Reuters)

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Rome — April 3, 2024

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Pope Francis renewed his calls for an immediate cease-fire in the Gaza Strip after seven of the aid workers of World Central Kitchen, a humanitarian organization that delivers food in war-torn countries, were killed in an Israeli missile strike in Gaza Strip April 2.

"I express my deep regret for the volunteers killed while engaged in the distribution of humanitarian aid in Gaza. I pray for them and their families," the pontiff said during the general audience April 3.

In an April 2 statement, the World Central Kitchen, or WCK, founded by celebrity Catholic chef José Andrés, said the workers were leaving the Deir al-Balah warehouse after delivering 100 tons of humanitarian food in "two armored cars branded with the WCK logo" when the attack happened.

The organization said that despite coordinating the delivery with the Israeli military, the convoy was struck April 1 in an apparent "targeted attack by the IDF," or Israeli Defense Forces.

WCK CEO Erin Gore said she was "heartbroken and appalled" by the killing of the aid workers who hailed from Australia, Poland, United Kingdom, as well as "a dual citizen of the U.S. and Canada, and Palestine."

"This is not only an attack against WCK, this is an attack on humanitarian organizations showing up in the most dire of situations where food is being used as a weapon of war. This is unforgivable," Gore said.

The relief organization said that due to the attack, it would pause their operations in the region "immediately."

In a video message, Israeli military spokesman Daniel Hagari expressed his condolences "to the entire World Central Kitchen family" and said the IDF will open an independent probe "to examine this serious incident further."

"This will help us reduce the risk of such an event from occurring again," Hagari said.

"Unfortunately in the last day there was a tragic incident where our forces unintentionally struck innocent people in the Gaza Strip," said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu April 2. "It happens in war, and we are thoroughly investigating it."

Immediately after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, Israel started strikes in the Gaza Strip. As of April 3, the death toll of Palestinians is close to 33,000, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

Francis, in his general audience remarks, renewed his appeal "for the exhausted and suffering civilian population to be given access to humanitarian aid and for the hostages to be released immediately."

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The Order of Malta strongly deplored the attack on World Central Kitchen staff. "Humanitarian aid is and must remain neutral and those in need and those who provide assistance should be protected," a lay Catholic religious order distributing humanitarian help in many places in the world said in a post on X, formerly Twitter, on April 2.

The Polish Council of Christians and Jews, in a statement sent to KAI, Polish Catholic Information agency, said that they count "on the Israeli authorities to explain the causes of this drama and do everything possible to prevent such a situation from happening again.

"We believe that humanitarian aid must be delivered in sufficient quantities and treated neutrally, that the kidnapped Israelis must be released by the Hamas authorities, and that all sides should strive for an end to the war that allows for lasting peaceful coexistence," the council said April 2.

A dual U.S.-Canadian citizen, Jacob Flickinger, was killed in the attack. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the aid workers as "heroes" who were "simply trying to help fellow human beings." He urged "a swift, thorough and impartial investigation to understand exactly what happened."

Damian Soból from Poland was among the seven humanitarian aid workers killed in the Israeli strike.

"He never feared anything," Krzysztof Rodzen, his friend from the Polish city of Przemysl, bordering Ukraine, told OSV News.

Soból was a Catholic "and a man who would help anyone even for the price of his own life," he said.

"It all started with the war in Ukraine. Earlier he was part of the team building a hospice in Przemysl, but once the war started, he dropped everything and went to help with World Central Kitchen," Rodzen said of his friend.

Soból also participated in humanitarian efforts in Morocco and Turkey after deadly earthquakes in 2023.

In a March 2 video posted by WCK on X, Soból was passionately talking about the water treatment system they've built on the roof of their Gaza kitchen.

"With this equipment we're able to produce all the clean water needed to prepare tens of thousands of meals daily for displaced Palestinians," the post said.

"There was something particular in his last visit after Christmas," remarked Rodzen, his voice filled with sadness. "He brought souvenirs for everyone, like he wanted to say goodbye."

"Damian was not a soldier. I am a soldier, and I don't know whether I would have courage as big as he had to help people in need," Rodzen underlined.

Bidding farewell to those killed, Polish President Andrzej Duda said, "These brave people changed the world for the better with their service and dedication to others. This tragedy should never have happened and must be explained."

Australian Lalzawmi "Zomi" Frankcom, 43, from Melbourne, also was killed in the attack. Frankcom died "doing the work she loves," her family said in a statement quoted by the BBC.

She was the WCK's relief lead in Gaza. She was described as a "kind, selfless and outstanding human being (who) traveled the world helping others in their time of need," the BBC said.

Palestinian driver Saifeddin Issam Ayad Abutaha, 25, who was killed in the strike was buried in his hometown, Rafah in the Gaza Strip, on April 2.

Three British nationals killed were John Chapman, 57, James (Jim) Henderson, 33, and James Kirby, 47.

The attack on the WCK convoy is not the first time that the Israeli military has been accused of targeting humanitarian aid workers in Gaza.

In December, Thomas White, the director of the UNRWA, the United Nations relief agency for Palestinian refugees, said that a U.N. aid convoy was fired on by Israeli soldiers as it "returned from Northern Gaza along a route designated by the Israeli army."

According to The Associated Press, Israeli troops also were accused of firing on Palestinians attempting to obtain food from an aid convoy. Israel said most of the 100 people who died Feb. 29 were killed in a stampede, and the soldiers fired only when they felt threatened by the crowd.

"Let us avoid all irresponsible attempts to broaden the conflict in the region, and let us work so that this and other wars that continue to bring death and suffering to so many parts of the world may end as soon as possible," Franics said April 3. "Let us pray and work tirelessly for weapons to be silenced and for peace to reign once again."

In his homily during Easter Mass March 31, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, also lamented the war that "never seems to end."

"The only strong and decisive voice seems to be that of weapons," Cardinal Pizzaballa said. "In vain have been the many attempts to cease hostilities. Useless seem to be the calls for cease-fire, which tried to resolve the conflict in a different way than with weapons."