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Pope Francis greets journalists aboard his flight back to Rome from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Se

Pope Francis greets journalists aboard his flight back to Rome from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Sept. 4, 2023, after his four-day visit to the Asian country. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Francis will embark on an ambitious 12-day trip across Asia-Pacific and Oceania in September, the Vatican announced on April 12.

The trip, which is scheduled Sept. 2-13, will mark the longest trip abroad during Francis' 11-year papacy and will likely test the limits of an 87-year-old pope who has endured a number of health challenges in recent years. It will mark the pope's 45th international trip since his election in 2013.

The four-country journey will begin in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia and home to the world's largest Muslim population. From there, the pontiff will also visit Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Singapore. A full schedule for the trip has yet to be released.

Tentative plans had been in the works for Francis to visit Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea in 2020, but the trip was never officially scheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All three countries face severe threats from climate change, which is expected to be a major theme during the pope's visit.

Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed the visit in a statement on April 12, saying the visit "holds significant importance to the Indonesian people, not only for Catholics, but also for all religious communities."

"The visit is also expected to strengthen the message of tolerance, unity and world peace," it said.

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In recent months, there has been speculation that the pope would also include a visit to Vietnam on this trip, though no such plans have been announced.

No pope has ever visited Communist-run Vietnam, though last year, it was announced that the Vatican would soon be allowed to set up a permanent diplomatic office in the country, which is home to about 7 million Catholics.

On a flight back to Rome from Mongolia last September — where many Vietnamese pilgrims had traveled to the country to see the pope — Francis hinted that a trip to the country was possible.

"If not me, then surely John XXIV," will visit Vietnam, he said, using a hypothetical name for his successor.

The Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, is currently on a six day trip to the country where formal diplomatic relations are eventually expected to be established.

Francis has not traveled abroad since last September for an overnight trip to Marseille, France, where he headlined a migration summit. In November, the pope was due to travel to Dubai for the COP28 U.N. climate conference, but the trip was canceled just three days prior to his departure due to respiratory issues.