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Pope Francis gives his blessing after praying for prisoners of war and victims of torture at the end of his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 17, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by Catholic News Service

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Pope Francis appealed to countries at war to release prisoners and offered special prayers for those who have endured torture.

At the end of his weekly general audience April 17, Francis said that he knew "our thoughts, all of ours, go at this time to people in wars. We think of the Holy Land: Palestine, Israel. We think of Ukraine, the tormented Ukraine."

Francis also spoke about "the prisoners of war: may the Lord move the will to set them all free."

"And speaking of prisoners, those who are tortured come to mind," he said. "The torture of prisoners is a very terrible thing; it is inhuman" and an attack on human dignity.

Francis did not mention a specific country when talking about torture.

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The U.N. special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment told the U.N. Human Rights Council in March that in armed conflicts around the globe "torture is increasingly being applied as a standard brutal practice rather than as a grave crime of exception."

The rapporteur, Alice Jill Edwards, focused specifically on Russia's war on Ukraine.

"Based on the volume of credible allegations of torture," she said, her conclusion "is that torture is an element of Russia's war policy. These grievous crimes appear to be neither random nor incidental. Rather the methods, purposes and targets were consistent and included being applied across multiple temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and/or inside Russia itself."

Her investigation showed "sincere efforts" on the part of Ukraine to treat Russian prisoners of war with dignity, she said, but she did receive "several allegations of abusive treatment by Ukrainian officials," particularly during the capture, arrest or transfer of the prisoners. She called on Ukrainian authorities to investigate allegations promptly and to reinforce training, disciplinary and other preventive measures.