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A child looks on at a school turned into a temporary shelter for displaced people in Beirut Oct. 9, 2024, amid the ongoing hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel. (OSV News/Louisa Gouliamaki, Reuters)

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As the Israel-Hamas war enters its second year, expanding to a wider region of the Middle East, two Catholic agency leaders based in Jerusalem and Beirut are warning the conflict is decimating the populations they serve.

On Nov. 4, the Catholic Near East Welfare Agency-Pontifical Mission hosted a media briefing with CNEWA-Pontifical Mission's regional directors Michel Constantin, who oversees efforts in Lebanon and Syria, and Joseph Hazboun, who heads up the mission in Palestine and Israel.

CNEWA, established in 1926 by Pope Pius XI established to support the Eastern churches, administers the Pontifical Mission, which was founded as the Pontifical Mission for Palestine by Pope Pius XII in 1949 to care for Palestinian refugees. The mandate of the mission, which was subsequently placed under CNEWA's direction, has been extended by several pontiffs to care for all those affected by war and poverty in the Middle East.

The media briefing was held at CNEWA's New York offices, moderated by CNEWA-Pontifical Mission’s president, Msgr. Peter I. Vaccari, and Michael La Civita, the agency's director of communications and marketing.

Hazboun, speaking by video call from Jerusalem, said in his update that conditions in his region are "terrible."

"In Jerusalem, life seems to be normal but the tension is unbearable," he said. "There is a rupture in the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians that will take years to mend. And this rupture started after October 7th last year because of the events and because of the high level of incitement which drove both communities, the Israelis and the Palestinians, to be afraid of one another."

The Israel-Hamas war was launched in the wake of Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, when militants from the Gaza Strip gunned down more than 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and took over 240 civilians and soldiers hostage. In

September, the conflict extended into Lebanon, where the Iran-backed Shia militia Hezbollah is based.

Hazboun said that "the worst case scenario is in Gaza," where the war has left 90% of the population displaced.

"Women, children, families had to move from their own homes and apartments seeking what were announced as 'safe areas,' which were not safe at all," he said.

He pointed to strikes on the Holy Family Latin Church and St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church compounds, which have sheltered refugees amid the war.

Schools have also been destroyed, he said, including the Latin Patriarchate's Holy Family School and the Rosary Sisters School — as have "almost 50%" of the hospitals, with medical personnel also among the slain.

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"This war is really something that we have never seen," he said. "This is way beyond any imagination. ... There is a systematic destruction of the infrastructure and what makes life possible in Gaza."

The war has also brought a halt to the tourism sector, thereby depriving families of much-needed income, said Hazboun, noting that "the situation is very severe" in the Bethlehem region, where "around 4,000 families" no longer have the means to support themselves.

In Lebanon, said Constantin, "we are on the opposite side of their suffering," with an estimated "25% of residential buildings, schools, churches or mosques ... wiped out."

Speaking by video call from Beirut, Constantin said that "almost 90% of the people" in Lebanon's south have fled north, deepening a long-running socioeconomic difficulties for that nation, which has also been home to an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees fleeing their nation's repression and political instability.

"People are on the street, people are without any capacity to sustain their family, themselves," said Constantin. "They were warned, and they had to leave immediately. I have seen elderly people who need oxygen. They were left behind and they were killed in their homes because they couldn't take them in 20 minutes'

(time). ... So they don't have time to pick up anything, to take anything with them. We have seen people in pajamas on the street, because they left at midnight."

Constantin added, "We are very much afraid in Lebanon that this could create internal tension that could lead eventually maybe to a mini-civil war or a kind of internal violence between Lebanese."

Although CNEWA-Pontifical Mission teams in have been able to provide aid, "the humanitarian crisis is huge ... unprecedented," said Constantin, who along with Hazboun stressed his gratitude for donor support, which has enabled the CNEWA-Pontifical Mission to become a lifeline for those suffering due to the war.

Constantin said such support is all the more critical since the Lebanese government is "very weak," and unable to provide even basic shelter, potable water or electricity.

Asked by OSV News if they feared "donor fatigue" undermining aid to the region as the war drags on, both Hazboun and Constanting urged the West and the world to help broker peace.

"The population is exhausted. So what we need from the nations to put every effort to bring about peace, we need peace in the region. We don't need wars," said Hazboun.

"We can still see hope, because people are still standing for each other," said Constantin. "We just need peace to continue to be able to rebuild our country."