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Patton wear habit and smiles in front of statue of St. Francis and the Sultan.

Father Francesco Patton, the custos of the Holy Land, is seen Dec. 28, 2024, in the Franciscan Curia in Jerusalem. Reacting to a ceasefire deal reached between Israel and Hamas Jan. 15, 2025,, the custos of the Holy Land was critical of the international community, saying it had "been glaringly absent during these long months of war" and "must now make it clear to everyone that it still exists and maintains a constructive capacity" to guide Israel and Hamas. (OSV News/Matthew Lomanno)

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As news spread of a long-awaited ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, reactions from religious leaders in the region expressed hopes for peace in the Holy Land, concern for the safety of hostages as well as the people of the Gaza Strip for the past 15 months.

In a statement released Jan. 16 by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land said they hoped the ceasefire "will mark an important end to the violence that has caused immeasurable suffering."

"It is a necessary step to halt the destruction and meet the urgent humanitarian needs of countless families affected by the conflict," the statement read.

The agreement, which must overcome a few hurdles before being implemented, and pass a vote in the Israeli parliament — currently delayed by Israel — included a six-week initial ceasefire phase and the gradual withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip.

But as CNN reported, overnight, shortly after the deal was agreed, local emergency crews in Gaza said the territory was tormented by constant bombardment, with Israeli strikes killing at least 77 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Civil Defense. Of those killed, 21 were children and 25 women, it said.

This came just after a celebration outburst on the streets of Gaza. Father Gabriel Romanelli, pastor of Holy Family Parish in Gaza, told Italian bishops' conference new agency SIR that people were beginning "to nurture the hope of returning to their homes — for those who still have them — and understanding what is left and how to rebuild."

"For everyone, it also means returning to live without the constant nightmare of planes, bombs, fighting, and violence," he told SIR. "Everyone hopes the truce holds," he told SIR Jan. 15.

The deal, announced Jan. 15 following several months of negotiations brokered by Egypt, Qatar and the United States, also included a deal that would see the release of Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners.

In their statement, church leaders of the Holy Land said they were aware that the end of the war "does not mean the end of the conflict" and that it was time for both sides to seriously and credibly address the deep-rooted issues that have been at the root of this conflict for far too long."

"Genuine and lasting peace can only be achieved through a just solution that addresses the origin of this long-standing struggle. This requires a long process, a willingness to acknowledge each other's suffering and a focused education in trust that leads to overcoming fear of the other and the justification of violence as a political tool," the Catholic bishops of the region said.

Praying that the ceasefire will "bring a sense of serenity and relief to all" the Holy Land bishops expressed their hope that the ceasefire would be the starting point of a path toward "reconciliation, justice and sustainable peace" that promotes "healing and unity among all the people of the Holy Land."

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In their statement, the bishops also called on the international community to develop "a clear and just political vision for the post-war period" because "a future built on dignity, security and freedom for all peoples is a prerequisite for true and lasting peace."

"Despite the pain we have suffered, we continue to look to the future with unwavering hope," the bishops said.

The bishops' statement echoed remarks made by Father Francesco Patton, the custos of the Holy Land, to SIR, the news service of the Italian bishops' conference, not long after the deal was announced.

"I hope that starting Sunday, hostages and prisoners will actually begin to be freed, and that from here a path will begin, surely a long one, toward stabilization to make Gaza livable again and, at the same time, governable," Patton said.

Although the parameters of the agreement were based on a proposal made by the outgoing U.S. President Joe Biden in May, Patton said the deal "was further encouraged by the election of Donald Trump" and hoped that it would "mark a new political phase at the level of the Israeli government."

The custos of the Holy Land was critical of the international community, saying it had "been glaringly absent during these long months of war" and said it "must now make it clear to everyone that it still exists and maintains a constructive capacity" in guiding both Israel and Hamas.

"The ceasefire in Gaza must not become a pretext to turn the West Bank into a new Gaza," he added. He also hoped that the agreement would finally reunite Israeli

hostages with their families "after long months of thwarted attempts to free these people."

However, "it would be appropriate for the parties involved in this terrible and painful situation to learn that they can no longer continue like this because continuing will mean adding suffering to suffering, fear to fear, and uncertainty about the future to uncertainty about the future. If a future for everyone is to be ensured, the only way out is mutual acceptance."

Citing the testimony of Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of Hersh, an American Israeli hostage killed in Gaza, Patton said peace between Israel and Palestine "is the realistic position of people who, through suffering, have developed a different idea: from shared and acknowledged suffering, a path to mutual acceptance can emerge."

He also emphasized the need to guarantee aid for the people of Gaza.

"The population is at the breaking point," Patton told SIR. "For this reason, there must be someone who not only allows the trucks to enter but also accompanies them and organizes an orderly distribution of the goods they bring."

U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres welcomed the announcement of the deal and told reporters at the United Nations that it was crucial the ceasefire agreement "removes the significant security and political obstacles to delivering aid across Gaza."

In a statement posted online Jan. 16, Anton Asfar, secretary general of Caritas Jerusalem, said the ceasefire agreement was "not just the end of a bloody phase, but a chance to save lives and restore the human dignity that was nearly crushed under the horrors of war."

"At Caritas Jerusalem, we see this day as a new beginning, but we know that the road to achieving real and lasting peace is long," Asfar wrote.

"The war destroyed hospitals, homes, and schools, as well as parts of our main office in Gaza, but it could not destroy the spirits of its residents. We saw men, women, and children in Gaza fighting to survive, and we found in their hearts courage and faith that inspire the world. In every medical point we set up, we were witnesses to painful but hopeful human stories," he said.