News



Palestinian twins Mahmoud and Ibrahim Al-Atout sit amid the rubble of their destroyed house after being reunited, in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip, Jan. 29, 2025, following the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas,. The brothers were separated during the war when Ibrahim was displaced to the southern part of Gaza at Israel's order. (OSV News/Retuers/Osama Al-Arabid)

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The long-awaited and elusive ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has silenced bombs and halted air raids on the Gaza Strip, for the time being, but the humanitarian situation there is dire, the regional director of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association reported.

CNEWA, established in 1926 by Pope Pius XI 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.

CNEWA is tending to the needs of thousands of people including children left without families, pregnant women, new mothers and the chronically ill in desperate need of health care.

"Gaza's humanitarian situation is bleak," Joseph Hazboun told The Catholic Register, Canada's national Catholic newspaper based in Toronto, from his office in Jerusalem. "Over 17,000 Gaza children are without their families, many of them orphaned. An estimated 150,000 pregnant women are in desperate need of vital health services. Those with chronic illnesses have no medicine or access to medical treatment. Women and girls face sexual violence."

The war has also taken a heavy toll on the mental health of children and adults who've had to endure the ordeal of a war launched by Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023, which persisted until ceasefire took effect Jan. 19 while the parties involved resisted proposals for a peaceful settlement along the way, he said.

"One million children need mental health and psychosocial support for severe depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts," he said, quoting numbers provided by UNICEF.

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Hazboun is also deeply concerned about the dwindling numbers of Christians left in the Holy Land. One of his own staff, Sami Tarazi, lost both his parents while they were sheltering in the Orthodox Church of St. Porphyrios when it was struck by a missile, while Tarazi himself was out in the field carrying food and water to people of all faith groups.

"There are only 600 (Christians) left now," Hazboun said.

He estimated that as the Rafah crossing fully reopens, there will be only 300 left.

On Feb. 1, the Rafah border crossing was opened for the first time so that sick and wounded Palestinian patients from Gaza could travel to Egypt for medical treatment abroad. The crossing was shut down for the last nine months.

But undaunted by the enormous challenges to addressing the human cost of war, CNEWA's Pontifical Mission for Palestine, or PMP, is moving forward with relief programs, Hazboun continued.

Currently, PMP-Jerusalem is delivering psychosocial programs in various areas of the Gaza Strip, providing food packages as well as funding a medical care program serving thousands of children, youth and women.

"Nutrition programs for mothers and children are a priority as chronic diseases continue to spread," he said. "Medical care is urgently needed as patients have not seen a specialist in 15 months. Schools need to be opened and functional again to allow children to resume their education.

"We provide support to all of Gaza's communities as well as the Christian community that will continue to call Gaza home," he emphasized, adding that the aid programs are conducted in cooperation with partners and are dependent on funding by donors around the world.



A Palestinian man carries a propane tank Feb. 3, 2025, in Gaza City, Gaza Strip, amid a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. (OSV News/Reuters/Dawoud Abu Alkas)

Aid to the Church in Need, or ACN, another pontifical charity that works in collaboration with the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, is also actively working to deliver critical humanitarian aid to the Christian community (and others) in Gaza, focusing on medical supplies, food and shelter assistance, since the Christian population there has been significantly impacted by the conflict and urgently needs support to rebuild their lives.

"The ceasefire agreement has been reached between Hamas and Israel ... allowing the inhabitants of the Holy Land, affected by the war that broke out on Oct. 7, 2023, to breathe a sigh of relief and, above all, to finally hope for a lasting peace," said Mario Bard, the Montreal-based head of information of ACN.

Hazboun cautioned however, that there are obstacles to both a lasting peace and challenges to the delivery of aid.

"The biggest challenge moving forward is the free movement of people and the reconstruction of Gaza, which will cost billions of dollars," he said. "The checkpoints and road closures are worse after the ceasefire. All the side roads are blocked and we have to take a long route to get to Ramallah to avoid long hours of waiting at a busy checkpoint."

Church leaders in the Holy Land issued a joint statement Jan. 16 saying: "The end of the war does not mean the end of the conflict. It is therefore necessary to seriously and credibly address the deep-rooted issues that have been at the root of this conflict for far too long."

The prospects of an enduring peace look dim at this point, according to Hazboun and other observers, given the history of the ceasefire deal that has finally been brokered by the United States, Qatar and Egypt. An earlier ceasefire was only temporary and saw fewer than half of the Israeli hostages returned in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners before fighting broke out again.

"Only peace and freedom and a life with dignity for both Israelis and Palestinians can bring peace and security," Hazboun said.

On Feb. 1, 183 Palestinian prisoners were freed from Israeli jail after Hamas released three Israeli hostages: Ofer Kalderon, 53, and Yarden Bibas, 34, handed to the Red Cross in Khan Younis, and dual U.S.-Israeli citizen Keith Siegel, 65, who was released in Gaza City.