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Palestinian children react near pots of food from a charity kitchen in Gaza City July 25, 2025, amid a hunger crisis. For months, U.N. officials, aid groups and experts have warned that Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are on the brink of famine without formally declaring one. (OSV News/Dawoud Abu Alkas/Reuters)

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Vatican City — August 7, 2025
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Pope Leo XIV, like Pope Francis before him, consistently has called on Hamas to release the hostages it kidnapped in Israel almost two years ago and has pleaded with Israel to allow the delivery of more humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza.

The urgency of listening to the papal pleas, which began after the Hamas attack on Israel Oct. 7, 2023, became more obvious when photographs and videos of Gazans, particularly children, malnourished and on the point of death filled the news in late July and early August. And then Hamas and a group called Islamic Jihad released separate, shocking videos of two of the hostages, showing them emaciated in captivity.



Yaron Sideman, Israel's ambassador to the Holy See, is seen in a file photo from Sept. 16, 2024, when he presented his letters of credential to Pope Francis at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"We are talking about a terrorist organization that kidnapped people from their beds and from music festivals and is holding them in sub-human conditions and

deliberately torturing them and starving them to death — deliberately and on camera — and making them dig their own graves on camera," said Yaron Sideman, the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See.

The ambassador spoke to Catholic News Service about the videos Aug. 6, saying urgent international action is needed to pressure Hamas to release the hostages; he also repeated the Israeli government's claims that reports of widespread starvation in Gaza are false.

But Issa Kassissieh, the Palestinian ambassador to the Holy See, told CNS Aug. 7, "All credible international human rights organizations, including the United Nations, agree there is a famine in Gaza."

"If Israeli officials deny that there is widespread starvation in Gaza, then they should allow international media unrestricted access to the area and let the cameras speak for themselves," Kassissieh said.

In late July, Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican-based umbrella organization of national Catholic charities, and more than 100 other humanitarian groups issued a joint statement claiming they had seen their own aid workers in Gaza "waste away" from lack of food.

While food, medicine and fuel aid sit in warehouses and on trucks awaiting delivery, "the government of Israel's restrictions, delays and fragmentation under its total siege have created chaos, starvation and death," the statement said.

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Sideman told CNS, "Israel is doing way, way more than what it is obligated to do under international law in order to provide humanitarian assistance and food into Gaza."

The problem, he said, is that aid agencies are not picking up the food or, when they do, it is "immediately looted by Hamas."

Hamas, the Israeli ambassador said, "is the real reason why the civilian population in Gaza not only is suffering now but has been suffering for decades. And that reason has to be taken out. Out of the equation."

Israel's security, the survival of the people of Gaza and peace throughout the Middle East depend on Israel's success in "eliminating Hamas as a military and governing entity in Gaza," Sideman said.

Meanwhile Kassissieh, the Palestinian ambassador, said that "in the face of such immense tragedy, we must listen to voices of compassion and wisdom. We urgently need a global commitment to justice, peace and humanitarian relief to bring an end to this crisis."