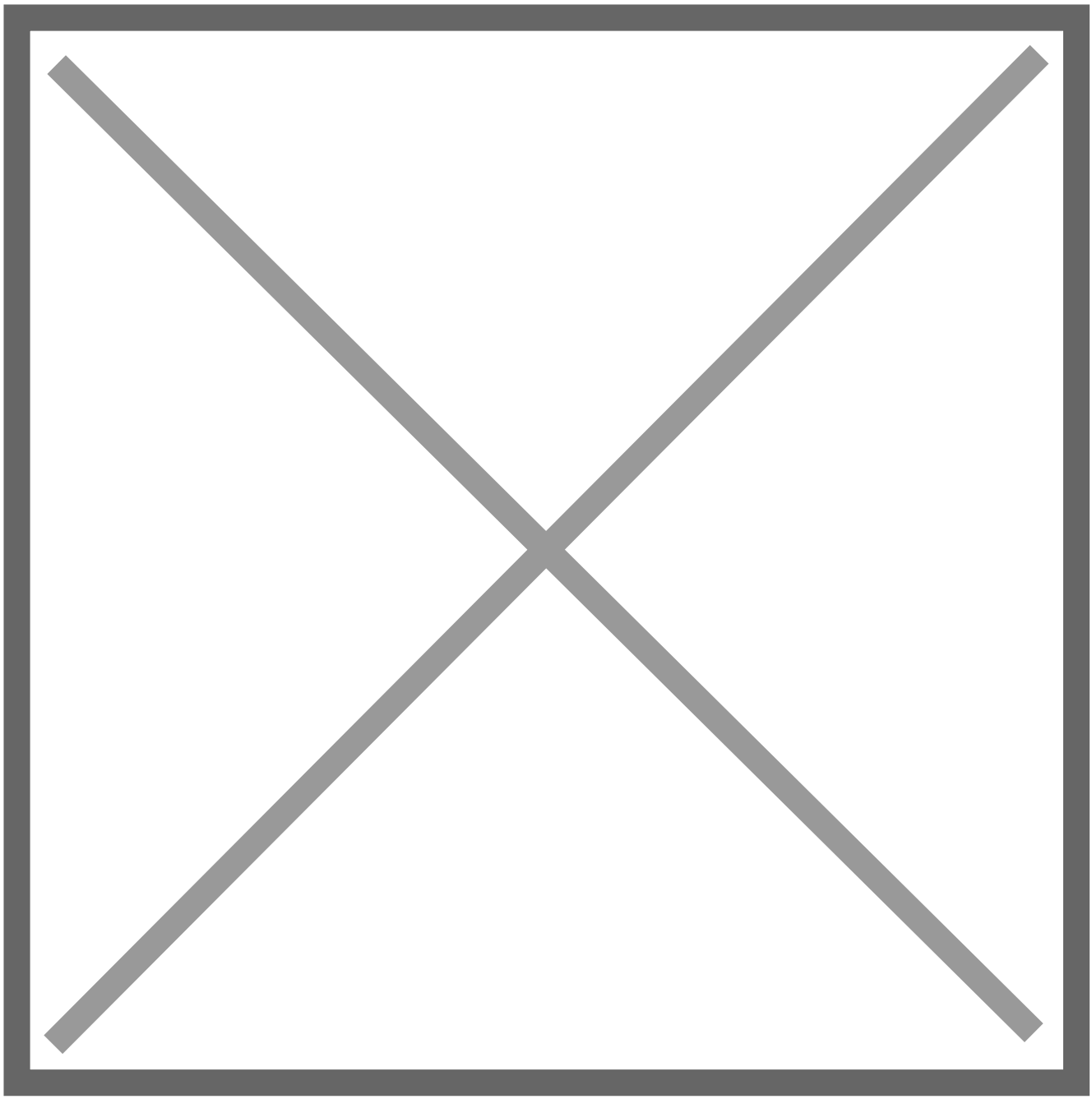
News



A freed Palestinian prisoner is greeted by his family member in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Oct. 13, 2025, after being released from an Israeli jail as part of a hostages-prisoners swap and a ceasefire deal in Gaza between Hamas and Israel. (OSV News/Reuters/Ammar Awad)

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Scenes of joy, relief and tearful welcomes flooded media across the world Oct. 13 as the remaining Israeli hostages were freed from Hamas captivity in the Gaza Strip as part of the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement.

As part of the U.S.-proposed deal, 250 Palestinian prisoners were also released by Israel, with 1,650 more to be freed.

Minutes before U.S. President Donald Trump addressed the Knesset on Oct. 13, Joseph Hazboun of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association-Pontifical Mission spoke to OSV News and said that with the deal reached, he was "very happy at long last" but "not optimistic enough to say" it's "a peace agreement" but "a ceasefire."

"This is the day that we've been waiting for for two years," said Hazboun, regional director for CNEWA-Pontifical Mission's Jerusalem office.

"The people that were ordered to evacuate and move all around the Gaza Strip everal times are finally going back to their ... areas of residency," he told OSV News. "I'm not sure what they will find there — probably the ruins of their homes, but at least they will be safe. There is no more bombing from air or from the sea or from the land."

Addressing the Knesset before Trump spoke, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking in English and turning to the U.S. leader, said: "Two weeks ago

you succeeded in doing something miraculous. You succeeded in doing something that no one believed was possible."

"You brought most of the Arab World — most of the world — behind your proposal to free the hostages and end the war," he said, thanking the U.S. president. "May God bless the covenant between the two promised lands," Israel and the U.S., he said, wrapping up his speech.

"We gather on a day of profound joy, of soaring hope, of renewed faith, and above all, a day to give our deepest thanks to the Almighty God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," Trump said, starting his speech to the Knesset.

Hazboun, who spoke to OSV News from Jerusalem, said that Trump "deserves the credit for putting an end to the war" as he "basically informed Netanyahu he has to stop. And now Trump is the guarantor of the end of the war."

He also warned that with earlier attempts to stop the war, the parties "on several occasions shifted position for whatever reason," therefore in the Holy Land, "we have our hands on our heart praying that this agreement will last."

Now, Hazboun said, all eyes are on Gaza, where tens of thousands began to make their way back to their homes, or what's left of them.

Many Palestinians returned to see only mostly rubble left, with Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, the pastor of Gaza City’s Catholic parish, saying the entire enclave has experienced a "tsunami" of destruction.

Asked about the Christian community sheltering in the Holy Family Parish and St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church compound, Hazboun said they will for now "remain in the church compound, because most of them, they lost their homes and their apartments."

However, Hazboun said, "people will have the freedom now to go and check on their homes," but "it will take time" to see "who has his home or his apartment intact and can move back, who has minor destruction, who has full destruction."

What gives people a sense of relief is that "there is no more bombing around them," he continued, but at the same time "there is no infrastructure, there is no electricity, there is no water, there is no sewage" and "life is going to be complicated for the coming period."

Hazboun said CNEWA staff was given instructions "to start asking, inquiring about what are the immediate needs as far as maybe not food, but maybe water, probably medicine, medical aid, medical supplies — all remains to be seen."

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"Were there plans before? No, because with this war, it was extremely impossible to plan ahead of time. We had to wait until the end of the war. And of course we have to wait also until the Rafah crossing is open to see who will decide to remain in Gaza and who will not," Hazboun said.

He predicted that "we will witness an exodus from Gaza for the Muslims and for the Christians" and that for Christians it will be "more catastrophic because of the few, the little number of the Christian community that has remained in Gaza. So every person that leaves is a great loss."

As hundreds of aid trucks were allowed to reach Gaza starting in the early morning hours of Oct. 12, in a hopeful sign "prices have dropped enormously," Hazboun said, pointing out that the price of flour dropped to $2-4 from $25 per kilogram (2.2 pounds).

Hazboun said that most probably "will need tents. All those families that are coming back to Gaza and are looking for their destroyed homes will require tents to live in for the coming probably year or so. So I expect that that will be a big need," he said, adding that to make more detailed assessments, two to three days are needed.

Trump, speaking in the Knesset, said that now that all hostages are home, "together we've shown that peace is not just a hope that we can dream about. It's a reality we can build upon day by day, person by person and nation by nation." Because of that, he said, "the Middle East is finally ready to embrace its extraordinary potential."

Later in the day, Trump was scheduled to take part in signing of a peace deal between Israel and Hamas, along with the other guarantors of the Gaza peace deal, in the Red Sea resort city of Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt.

Leaders and foreign ministers from Germany, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia were expected to participate at the summit hosted by Egyptian President

Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi.

Asked how Catholics across the world can help, Hazboun said first of all, with prayers "that this truce, this ceasefire, will hold and move forward towards a permanent peace agreement where Gaza will have the opportunity to flourish."

By flourishing, he meant open borders so goods can come in freely, access to the sea and freedom of movement. "Early this morning," he said, "reports claimed that the Israelis are not allowing everything needed to go in, as was the case after every war since 2009. And this is one of the reasons why the situation in Gaza continues to be dramatic and why every now and then we have attacks and counterattacks. It's because the people of Gaza have been denied the opportunity to have a decent life."

He said that amid a sea of destruction, "bringing in all the materials that the strip requires without limitations" is crucial.

"Because how can you rebuild Gaza if wood is not permitted or iron is not permitted or cement is not permitted?" Hazboun asked, while admitting he's hopeful that "it is possible to rebuild, maybe even much better than it was."

"They say they require two to three years to remove the debris. The hundreds, thousands of tons of destroyed material ... but it all depends on the will of the people in power," he said. "And I hope that President Trump," along with leaders participating in signing of the peace agreement in Egypt, "will really exert pressure to move forward, as well as provide funding and find the right mechanism to help the people regain their dignity and find a suitable and decent place to live in."

Assessing humanitarian efforts of the past two years, he said that CNEWA-Pontifical Mission, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Caritas Jerusalem and Catholic Relief Services, "and many other organizations ... did marvelous work ... in circumstances that were at times extremely challenging."

"People risked their lives to deliver the goods that were required to save lives."