News



Palestinians take part in a Christmas tree–lighting event in Manger Square, next to the Church of the Nativity, traditionally regarded as the birthplace of Jesus Christ ahead of Christmas in the West Bank city of Bethlehem Saturday, Dec. 6, 2025. (AP/Mahmoud Illean)

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Bethlehem, West Bank — December 10, 2025

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For the past two Christmases, John Juka's family restaurant looked about the same as any business in Bethlehem: shuttered and eerily empty.

But on Saturday evening, it bustled with families and was lit by strings of red lights, a hopeful change in the Palestinian city that's been reeling since war broke out in Gaza.

Christmas celebrations are slowly returning to the traditional birthplace of Jesus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

While a shaky ceasefire holds in Gaza, Palestinians hope the festivities are a step toward a more peaceful future in a region shaken by tragedy.

"It's not like it was before the war," 30-year-old Juka said. "But it's like life is coming back again."

Muslim-majority city thrives on Christmas

Tourism and religious pilgrims have long been a prime economic engine for Bethlehem. Around 80% of the Muslim-majority city's residents live off it, according to the local government.

Those earnings ripple out to communities across the West Bank, a territory long marked by economic precarity.

"When we have 10,000 visitors and pilgrims sleeping in Bethlehem, that means the butcher is working, the supermarket is working and everybody is working," said Bethlehem Mayor Maher Nicola Canawati. "There's a ripple effect."

That economic lifeline vanished when war broke out in Gaza following the Hamas-led Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel. Bethlehem's authorities canceled major Christmas celebrations during Israel's retaliatory offensive in Gaza, whose health ministry has reported over 70,000 Palestinians killed.

At the same time, Israel's military scaled up operations in the West Bank, including communities near Bethlehem.

The unemployment rate in the city jumped from 14% to 65%, the mayor said. Poverty soared, and about 4,000 people left in search of work.

A United Nations report last month said the West Bank is going through its most severe economic downturn on record, citing the ongoing Israeli military operations.

Now Bethlehem residents seek a comeback.

"The decision we took was to reignite the spirit of Christmas and to reignite hope," the mayor said. "I think this sends a great message to the whole world that we Palestinians love life and we are eagerly looking forward to a peaceful solution."

Some tourists return

On Saturday, crowds lined with heavily armed police cheered following a prayer calling for peace, and fathers hoisted children onto their shoulders as a towering Christmas tree lit up Manger Square, near the site where Christians believe Jesus was born.

For families like Juka's that struggled to keep businesses afloat during the war, the sight of the crowds felt like a deep exhale after years of uncertainty.

The family opened the restaurant serving traditional Palestinian food in 1979. As many businesses in Bethlehem buckled during the latest war, the family wondered how long they could hang on.

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In August, as ceasefire negotiations picked up momentum, Juka said he began to see visitors walking the streets, and his family decided to reopen. "Tourists finally feel safe to come back," he said. "We're hopeful that we might see peace in our future."

In November, tourist visits to the city reached the highest since the war began, Canawati said, and reservations suggest that hotels will be at around 70% occupancy during Christmas.

Still, few in the hundreds of people gathered in Bethlehem's square were foreign tourists, and residents said celebrations were nowhere near the size they used to be.

West Bank tensions

Another West Bank resident, 29-year-old Issa Montas, said tensions in the territory have cast a pall over the holiday celebration.

While Bethlehem has long been a religious haven of relative calm, violence and military raids have been occurring regularly nearby. Israel's military has said it is cracking down on militants in the West Bank and responding to aggression.

On Saturday, Israel's military said its forces shot dead two Palestinian men who it said tried to ram soldiers with their vehicle at a security checkpoint in Hebron, south of Bethlehem. Palestinian health authorities confirmed at least one of their deaths.

Military checkpoints have turned commutes into sometimes day-long endeavors. Montas, who paints homes in Jerusalem for a living, said he traveled six hours from his home in Ramallah, less than 20 miles (32 kilometers) away, just to reach Bethlehem.

At the same time, Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank have reached the highest levels since the U.N. humanitarian office started collecting data in 2006, peaking in recent months.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose government is dominated by far-right proponents of the settler movement, has said the perpetrators are "a handful of extremists."

Montas spoke with frustration. "I see a lot of violence, but no one can stop them, not even the Israeli army or police can control them. They allow them to do this," he said of settlers. "It just feels like whatever I say, it will be useless because no one cares."

Still, even he expressed cautious hope on Saturday as children ran through packs of street vendors and a mix of Christmas and Arabic music floated over the crowds.

"This (celebration) is not just for us. It's for everyone. Christian, Jewish, Muslims," Montas said. "This Christmas is for everyone."