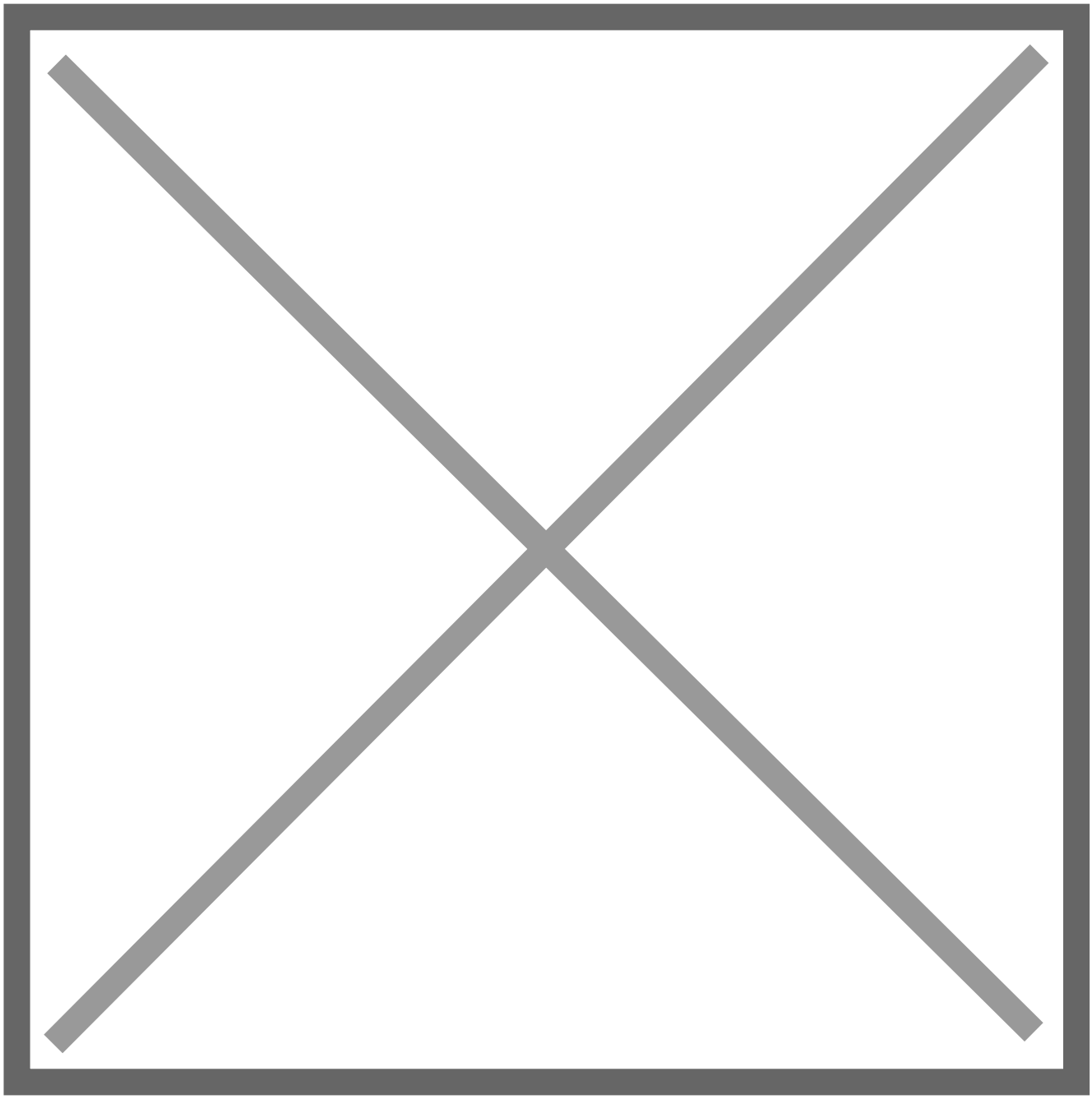
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Pope Leo XIV speaks to visitors in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican as they gather to pray the Angelus prayer Jan. 11, 2026, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. As anti-government protests in Iran continue despite an internet blackout and the use of lethal force against demonstrators, Leo expressed his concern over the escalating situation. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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As anti-government protests in Iran continue despite an internet blackout and the use of lethal force against demonstrators, Pope Leo XIV expressed his concern over the escalating situation.

After praying the Angelus prayer with pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square Jan. 11, Leo said his thoughts turned "to the situation currently unfolding in the Middle East, especially in Iran and Syria," where government forces clashed with Kurdish fighters in Aleppo.

The pope lamented that "ongoing tensions continue to claim many lives."

"I hope and pray that dialogue and peace may be patiently nurtured in pursuit of the common good of the whole of society," he said.

While it was not the first time protests have erupted against the theocratic government, led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the current wave, which began in late December, was sparked by the country's collapsing economy and record inflation.

However, the widespread nature of the protests, which is the most significant threat to Khamenei's rule in recent history, prompted a brutal crackdown by government forces.

The Associated Press reported midday Jan. 15 that according to activists, the government's crackdown has resulted in the deaths of at least 2,637 people. The number is likely higher, given the lack of information due to the country's internet shutdown. Some medical sources and international media outlets have put the death toll at over 12,000 to 20,000, CBS News reported.

Iran International, a U.K.-based news organization that covers news from Iran, said footage received from Iran shows dozens of dead bodies in body bags being held at various sites.

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"The most conservative estimates indicate that at least 2,000 people have been killed across Iran over the past 48 hours," Iran International reported.

The internet blackout is believed to have been enforced in part due to the exiled crown prince of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, who called for protests and issued specific calls to action, urging protesters to seize control of city centers and oust Khamenei.

In a video statement posted on X, Pahlavi encouraged protesters, saying they were "on the verge of reclaiming our dear Iran from the Islamic Republic."

Calling the murder of demonstrators proof of the government's "fear of a faster collapse and fall," the exiled prince said the "freedom of Iran" was near and that the blood spilled on the ground of Iran's immortal children guides us toward victory.

"We are not alone. Global assistance will arrive soon as well. Wait for my next message. We will soon reclaim our dear Iran from the Islamic Republic and hold celebrations of freedom and victory everywhere in Iran," he said.

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