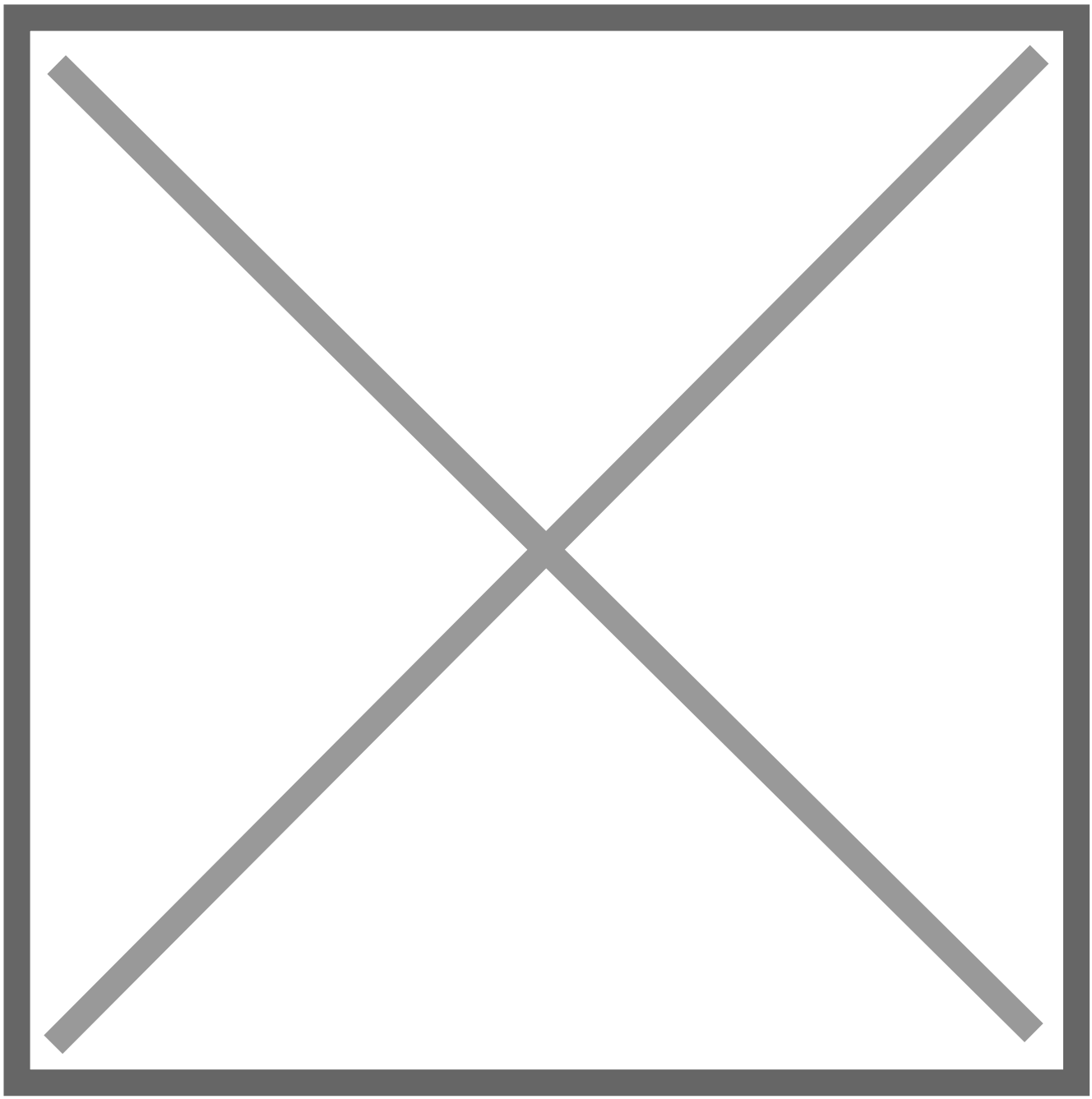


A child reacts March 11, 2026, in a tent camp in Deir al-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip. Large numbers of Palestinians continuously arrive in the refugee camp as Israel's daily airstrikes and tank shelling continue to target what the Israel describes as Hamas infrastructure and militants, according to news reports. (OSV News/Reuters/Mahmoud Issa)

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Jerusalem — March 16, 2026
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As retaliatory strikes from Iran, as well as from Hezbollah militants in Lebanon, continued, people in the Holy Land — especially Christians — face a dire present and an uncertain future.

Pope Leo XIV received a morning phone call from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas March 16 "concerning the alarming developments in the conflict in the Middle East and the living conditions of the Palestinian people," the Vatican Press Office said.

During the conversation, "the Holy Father reaffirmed the Holy See's commitment to achieving peace through political and diplomatic dialogue, as well as through full respect for international law."

In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need published March 13, George Akroush, director of development for the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, said reality faced by Palestinians is harder than ever and that he tries to reassure his children despite the constant threat from rockets or falling shrapnel since the conflict began Feb. 28.

"I try to pretend I'm not afraid in front of the children, but this has been the worst experience of my whole life. We have never faced anything like this," Akroush told ACN.

The U.S. and Israeli-led war entered its third week, with Iran continuing to strike back at both Israel and U.S. allies in the region. According to a March 15 report by The Times of Israel, eight people were wounded over the weekend after missiles were launched toward central and southern Israel.

According to the Jerusalem-based newspaper's report, Iran used ballistic missiles armed with cluster bomb warheads to inflict widespread damage.

As the country continued to deal with a steady stream of attacks, the Israeli government closed border crossings from the West Bank into Israel, inflicting further economic damage on Palestinians in the area.

Akroush told ACN that due to the border closures, many "lost access to their livelihoods, including teachers and support staff at the Christian schools in Jerusalem."

"This is a big challenge that we have to face, because 40% of our high-quality teachers and support staff come from the West Bank on a daily basis," he explained.

The Times of Israel reported that a Palestinian couple and their two children were killed in the West Bank, after Israel Defense Forces troops shot at their car. A police statement said security forces shot at the car, believing it was speeding toward them.

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The Times of Israel reported that a Palestinian couple and their two children were killed in the West Bank, after Israel Defense Forces troops shot at their car. A police statement said security forces shot at the car, believing it was speeding toward them.

The newspaper also reported that a 5-year-old Palestinian girl was struck by a car driven by an Israeli driver in the West Bank settlement of Carmel. Police determined in an initial investigation that the driver was not responsible because the girl allegedly "ran into the road." She was hospitalized with a laceration to her face, The Times of Israel said.

"In my opinion, this seems to be just a pretext to exert more pressure on the Palestinian communities, because we see Israeli soldiers carrying out incursions every day in the West Bank, and they have even been filmed supporting settler attacks against Palestinian villages and towns," Akroush told ACN.

"They are everywhere in the West Bank, but when it comes to facilitating access, they say they don't have sufficient human resources," he added.

The Latin Patriarchate's development director also noted the strain on humanitarian relief to Gaza. According to Akroush, since March 7 no supplies — such as medication, spare parts for hospitals or even antibiotics — have been delivered.

"We are trying our best to help the only Christian hospital there, which is very close to the Catholic compound, but all the channels that the Latin Patriarchate used to communicate with the authorities were closed. They say that everybody is involved in the war," he said.

Akroush told ACN that some 300 people sheltering at the Holy Family Parish compound have moved out, while an estimated 200 remain, as well as 50 people with disabilities cared for by the Missionaries of Charity.

"His Beatitude Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa has assured us that the Church will never abandon the weak communities," Akroush said.

In a YouTube video published March 15, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, pastor of Holy Family Parish, described a community clinging to "inner calm" despite the constant drum of war.

"Even in the worst moments, like this atrocious war that is being carried out across the Middle East, one must seek the God of peace in the depths of our hearts, in our neighbors, in works of charity, in doing good, in praying and praying more," he said.

Romanelli, who noted his 30 years of service in the region, said the parish continues a rigorous daily schedule of silent prayer and rosaries to counter the "physiological reactions, physical or even psychological," triggered by the constant sound of alarms.

"The life of a missionary is very intense right now," the priest said. "Both our religious communities and the laity here have lived through moments of great beauty, but also intense pain. This has made us grow in immeasurable trust in God

and in the effort to keep doing good."

This story appears in the **War in Iran** feature series. View the full series.