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Pope Leo XIV caresses a baby as he arrives to preside over Mass at Villa Deportiva Regional Ucayali in Pucallpa, Peru, on the tenth day of his twelve-day apostolic journey to South America, Sunday, Nov. 15, 2026. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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PUCALLPA, Peru — November 16, 2026
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Pope Leo XIV on Sunday demanded justice for environmental defenders killed for protecting the Amazon and backed efforts by Indigenous peoples to stop their lands from being ravaged by logging, illegal mining and the "insatiable thirst for domination."

On the penultimate day of his South American odyssey, Leo traveled into the Peruvian Amazon and channeled one of Pope Francis' core teachings that links care for the most vulnerable with care for God's creation.

"The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are inseparable," Leo told Indigenous representatives and missionaries gathered along the Ucayali River in the northeastern city of Pucallpa.

He said he came to Pucallpa to support them in their search for justice and peace and referred to what environmental groups estimate have been 57 murders of environmental defenders between 2010-2024.

"The blood of these brothers cries out to God and demands justice," Leo said to applause from the crowd, many of whom were wearing traditional feathered headwear and face markings of the region.

Illegal mining ravaging the rainforest and driving Indigenous out

In addition to the decades-long problem of deforestation, illegal gold mining has become an increasingly lucrative business in the Amazon, devastating forests and

polluting rivers. Miners use makeshift suction dredges and mercury, a toxic metal, to extract gold.

Raphael Hoetmer, Western Amazon program director at Amazon Watch, said wars and conflicts around the world have driven up the price of gold, increasing demand that in turn is resulting in more extraction from the Amazon.

"It's causing pollution, health issues, and environmental degradation," he said.

Illegal mining and coca production also drive deforestation and encroach on Indigenous territories, threatening ancestral lands and exposing communities to violence and organized crime.

Leo addressed the combination of threats in one of his most forceful speeches to date, drawing on his years of experience as a Peruvian bishop and Francis' constant preaching about the environment and the plight of Indigenous groups.

During the encounter and a subsequent Mass in Pucallpa, he demanded a different model of economic development that respects the Earth and the Indigenous who care for it rather than the "irresponsible exploitation" by outside actors.

"Very little has been done — and very slowly at that — while the means to exploit and pollute creation have accelerated," he said at Mass. "In the face of these evils, let us not bury the Lord's gifts, for he gives us the strength to repair and heal the suffering caused by an insatiable thirst for domination."

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Violence against Amazon defenders and Indigenous girls

In Peru, most murders of environmental defenders go unpunished; only a few have resulted in convictions. In 2025, the Peruvian courts upheld a 28-year prison sentence for four timber merchants for the murder of four Indigenous people who opposed logging, following a trial that lasted a decade.

The most recent conviction came in the case of Kichwa leader Quinto Inuma Alvarado, who was murdered in 2023 when he was ambushed by hitmen on a river in the San Martín region, the Amazonian territory he was defending.

In August, a court sentenced four people to up to 35 years in prison. The court found that Inuma had filed a complaint against the defendants to prevent deforestation and other crimes such as drug trafficking, and that those convicted plotted his death because he had spoken out against the crimes.

Leo also referred to a notorious rise in sexual violence against Indigenous Awajún and Wampis schoolgirls in Condorcanqui province in the northern Amazon, and blasted the "complicity," "impunity" and "corruption" surrounding them.

The Awajún and Wampis Women's Council, or Comuawuy, has recorded 370 cases of sexual violence in the province between January and July alone.

Following the women's persistent demands for justice, specialized prosecutors' offices were created, and the government launched a prevention plan. In January, the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations announced a 32-year prison sentence for a man accused of sexual violence against a 14-year-old girl.

Leo said the church was "deeply concerned" by the suffering endured by the victims and called for healing, consolation and reparation.

"Such abuse leaves deep wounds, often compounded by complicity and impunity," he said. "Corruption and arbitrary practices undermine the trust in the basic goodness of others."

A final day in Peru spent in Andes and Amazon

Leo's last full day in Peru was also his most ambitious, crisscrossing the nation to minister to communities high in the Andes mountains before he arrived in Pucallpa in the rainforest.

His first stop was the mountain city of Cusco, the former capital of the Inca empire. There, Leo praised the traditional expression of popular piety, such as processions and religious festivals, as effective ways of forging community and transmitting the faith, especially to young people.

Huge crowds lined Cusco's cobblestoned streets and packed its central Plaza de Armas, an imposing square decorated with a blend of Inca and Spanish colonial buildings. Many people wore the traditional Andean hats and colorful wool vests typical of the region, while others wore plastic ponchos to guard against a drizzling

morning rain.

"It is all worth it," said Margarida Salomon, 63, who said she came from Sucre in Bolivia to see the pontiff, spending about $500 to take a bus, sleep in a tent and eat Peruvian food from stalls. "I am still getting to know this pope, but the fact he is here in the Andes means a lot."

The visit to Cusco, 3,400 meters (more than 11,000 feet) above sea level, tested Leo's stamina as he continues recovering from lung cancer surgery last month. Leo sat in the chair of his popemobile during part of the ride around Cusco, but it wasn't clear if that was to preserve his energy or to steady himself on the uneven streets.

In general, the 71-year-old Leo has seemed unfazed by the toll of the three-nation South American trip, the longest of his pontificate. While others traveling on the papal plane have fallen ill, Leo has shown no sign of weakness or fatigue since the trip began Nov. 6, and in fact seemed energized, especially from the days spent in his former diocese of Chiclayo seeing old friends.

The Rev. Peter Hughes, an 84-year-old Irish priest who has lived in Peru for more than six decades, said Leo's itinerary reflected the church's concern for the poor.

"In Latin American terms, the Indigenous peoples, or what is left of them, are the most important collective representing the truly poor," he said. "That is what makes leaders like Pope Francis and Pope Leo speak the language of the Gospel in very human terms, putting a premium on justice and peace."

"In the Christian sense of justice, the most important people are the poor, the marginalized, and those who have no voice," he said.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in Uruguay, Argentina and Peru** feature series. View the full series.