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Escape path marked for Filipinos in Gaza, but workers stay put in Israel

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NCR Today

Philippine President Benigno Aquino III has announced his government is prepared to evacuate Filipinos who want to leave Gaza, where violence has flared between the Israel army and Hamas fighters in the last week.

In an interview in Cambodia during the summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Aquino said embassies in Israel and Egypt bordering Gaza have been alerted and the Department of Foreign Affairs has dispatched rapid-response teams to assess the situation with embassy officials.

Aquino said the teams have identified exit points for Filipinos in Gaza.

Tens of thousands of Filipinos are among those who face danger in renewed violence in Gaza that has reportedly killed more than 110 Palestinians and three Israelis. The latest eruption of violence began Nov. 14, when Israel killed a Hamas military leader, supposedly to end rocket attacks from Gaza.

About 90 rockets were reportedly fired from Gaza to Israel. More than half were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system. Five soldiers were wounded in one rocket attack, Israel reported. The country then struck back with what its military called a "direct hit" on two militants in northern Gaza.

On Friday, an alliance of organizations of Filipino migrant workers in the Middle East urged the Philippines government to condemn Israel's attack and to evacuate fearful Filipino workers from Gaza and Israel.

Vice Consul Greg Marie Marino spoke Tuesday with *NCR* by phone from the Philippine Embassy in Tel

Aviv, saying an estimated 41,000 Filipinos live around Israel, with about 80 percent working as caregivers for the elderly or children.

She said in Gaza, where the situation is harsher, there is only one overseas Filipino worker listed with the government. There are at least 20 other Filipinos living there with their Palestinian husbands and their children.

Israel's air force Tuesday was reportedly dropping leaflets across Gaza City, urging people to evacuate their homes "immediately," stirring fears the military was about to launch ground operations.

However, Egypt-led international efforts were reportedly expecting to enforce a ceasefire within hours.

Marino said while "a few" Filipinos in Gaza have requested the government's help in leaving the country, no Filipino in Israel has asked to be evacuated.

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"The embassy handling repatriation of Filipinos from Gaza is the Philippine Embassy in Cairo," Marino said.

She said the situation does not warrant an evacuation from Israel, except in southern areas close to Gaza.

"The level of danger in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem is not to the extent that we have to move people out of the country," she added. "The nature of their work is to stay in the homes of their wards."

Marino said the situation in these cities is "quite calm" where "business goes on as usual and people go on with their usual day-to-day life." People rushed to bomb shelters during rocket fire, but "resumed their normal life when things cleared."

She said in the southern part of Israel, where more rockets are falling, "We are constantly monitoring the situation of the Filipinos."

Marino said she was prepared to discuss with the Department of Foreign Affairs response team people's fears and worries as well as their wish to remain in Israel when the team arrived.

"They usually work in homes, and the homes and the buildings are equipped with bomb shelters. They know the emergency procedures. But we advise them, of course, to stay indoors and to avoid going out," Marino said.

Philippine-born Franciscan Fr. Angelo Beda Ison, who recently retired from a decade-long apostolate as chaplain of the Filipino community in Israel, wrote *NCR* on Tuesday about his experience of rocket fire from Gaza.

"In Israel, we hear the siren to warn people, and then we hear the explosion, but very few people would know where it landed," he said. "What we know is that the bombs explode in the sky because they are intercepted by the Iron Dome Shields."

Ison said Israel TV shows the casualties in Gaza, but not the damage in Israeli cities.

"I live in Jaffa, the outskirts of Tel Aviv where Arabs, Jews and Christians live. The first bomb exploded

on the Mediterranean Sea, which is close to Jaffa," he wrote.

He said his workload keeps his mind off the conflict. He is preparing to become attaché of the Vatican Embassy in Tel Aviv while serving as assistant parish priest in Jaffa/Tel Aviv.

Jesuit Fr. David Neuhaus, who currently coordinates the pastoral ministry among migrants in Israel, wrote *NCR* that "Filipinos for the most part do not seem to be thinking of leaving right now."

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