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Holy Land priests on both sides try to help parishioners confront war

by Judith Sudilovsky by Catholic News Service

Jerusalem — Two priests on either side of the Gaza border are trying to help their small communities confront the realities of war.

Both priests spoke of their material powerlessness against the weapons of war, but of the importance of their spiritual presence for their community.

In Gaza, Institute of the Incarnate Word Fr. Jorge Hernandez wrote on an entry on IVEMO, his community's Facebook page that, following the incursion of Israeli ground troops July 17, more parishioners have been contacting him for help to overcome their fears and stress caused by the bombings from air, land and sea.

"[There is] the sense of powerlessness, and the fear of the children," he wrote, adding that there is little he can do.

"Ours is an apostolate of presence. We can't leave the parish to visit parishioners and friends. We can't stop this war ... we can do 'nothing.' However, it is much. All these people are present in my holy sacrifice of the altar, in eucharistic adoration, in the holy rosary ... it does a lot."

Some 26 miles away, Fr. Gioele Salvaterra of the small community of Hebrew-speaking Catholics in the Israeli city of Be'er Sheva, where hundreds of Hamas missiles have been intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome defense system, said members of his parish are afraid to leave their homes. He said those who must leave are always aware of the location of bomb shelters and safe places in case of a warning siren.

"There are no answers I can give them except to be here and to listen to them, to help them with their

prayer and pray together with them on the phone," said Salvaterra, whose church is located on Peace Street.

He told Catholic News Service his parish includes a number of African asylum seekers who escaped wars in their countries and are reliving those experiences. Many of the places where the asylum seekers live do not have bomb shelters, he added.

The Palestinian Authority said Thursday that more than 730 people had been killed since July 8 and 4,620 had been injured. Israel noted that Hamas gunmen were included among those numbers.

In Israel, three people have been killed by Hamas missiles since the start of this round of fighting, including a disabled veteran and a foreign worker from Thailand, both of whom were unable to make it to bomb shelters in time.

Phone communication with Gaza is sporadic, and attempts to reach Hernandez by phone over several days were unsuccessful. However, he posted on Facebook that water and gas were scarce and electrical power outages, already a common occurrence in Gaza, had become unbearable, especially for hospitals.

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Hernandez wrote that the smell of war and decomposing bodies hung in the air, and he said he was concerned about the danger of an epidemic because of many unburied corpses.

He said he had witnessed "with deep grief" many families who had lost everything seeking refuge; some had come to the parish.

The mere fact of being among the people, even without being able to do anything "materially" was a source of comfort and relief for them, knowing that someone was accompanying them in their suffering, he wrote.

"It is also a source of strength and hope for the oppressed Christian," he wrote.

As a priest, he said, he feels it a grace and a privilege to serve as "an instrument of the good that God does to the souls of people in moments like these." He noted the concern and constant support from the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem for the Gaza community and the help of prayers for peace from different corners of the world.

Salvaterra said the situation of living under threat of missile attacks is "very difficult," and parishioners were reaching out more for his spiritual support, needing to talk. Many children had called him to speak of their fears and how they had to run to find a safe place every time a siren sounds, he said. Only about one-quarter of the number of people who normally attend Mass on Sunday had been coming, he said, despite the fact that the Mass has been celebrated in a bomb shelter.

"Yesterday we had a siren just before we were going to start Mass. There were two people already here so they stayed, but nobody else came after that," he said.

The community gathers to pray, but does not speak politics, he said, though most people feel for those in Gaza.

"We pray for all the suffering on both sides," he said.

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