

MIDDLE EAST

Gaza, war without limits. The siege of the small Christian community

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"The tanks near our church," says Sister Nabila Saleh, of the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters, "never stop firing. They direct their shots at everything that is still standing. The soldiers comb the territory. We have no light, no water, we have nothing. Just a lot of

fear. Now the entire compound of the Holy Family parish is surrounded by Israeli soldiers. But hope has not been extinguished that the Lord and Our Lady will not abandon us". The noise of the shots being fired by tanks are audible in the background of the conversation. The nun stammers, she is crying. She can no longer recount what is happening and the conversation is suddenly interrupted ... Telephone contact is cut.

The day after the tragic killing of two women, the situation in the vicinity of the Latin parish in Gaza is increasingly dramatic. The news, unfortunately, had to record a sad page for the Christians in the Strip. Last Saturday, two women were killed by an Israeli sniper. Mother and daughter. Their names were Nahida Khalil Anton and Samar Kamal Anton, both Christians. They were living inside the structure of the Latin parish church in Gaza together with seven hundred other people who found shelter there. Their house was completely destroyed by Israeli army bulldozers, a few days after the military with the Star of David had started a ground operation against Hamas militiamen.

Nahida and Samar were on their way to the bathroom when an Israeli sniper shot first Nahida and shortly after Samar. Seven other people were injured, one is in serious condition. They were part of the very small Catholic community inside the Strip. Killed for no reason. Through no fault of their own. Murdered in cold blood. "This is a campaign of death against the oldest Christian community in the world. Samar was the cook in the house of the Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta," said Hammam Farah, a relative of the two Palestinian Christians killed, in a statement on X.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, patriarch of the Mother Church, immediately informed of what was happening in the parish contacted Benjamin Netanyahu's government's war cabinet asking for a suspension of the military action. But to no avail. The military continued their operations. The order they had received was not revoked. And the tanks also went into action. One fired at the house of the Sisters of Mother Teresa. Inside the facility, besides the nuns, live 54 children with serious physical problems. Many of them are surviving on respirators. Now these little ones are looking for a new refuge. The only power generator was also destroyed and a nun was injured. "No one had warned us about the military operation," they say in the Patriarchate.

The military operations are right next to the premises of the Church of the Holy Family, and the Christians who have found refuge there are terrified. "These are moments of panic; there is terror, especially among the children and the elderly. But why are they killing us? We are not terrorists. After the tragic death of Nahida and Samar we are all sitting on the ground. None of us get up. We are really very scared," says a source in Gaza who does not want to reveal his identity for fear of retaliation. It seems

that Israeli snipers have orders to shoot at anything that moves.

Kamel Ayyad, spokesman for the Orthodox Church of St. Porphyry, a structure hit by an Israeli attack, during which as many as eighteen people lost their lives, including several children, is very worried; if the Israelis continue to bomb churches and kill worshippers, "many Christians," he said, "are intent on leaving Gaza, for America, Canada, or the Arab world, in search of a safer existence".

The tanks, meanwhile, continue their advance sowing death and destruction both in the north, now almost completely razed to the ground, and in the south of Gaza where the military has intensified its warfare. And it was precisely in one of these operations that three Israeli hostages were killed. They waved a white banner and shouted, in Hebrew, that they were Hamas prisoners. But to no avail. They were killed. Killed by 'friendly fire' while they believed they had regained their freedom. Army spokesman Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari explained the dynamics: "During the fighting, an army unit mistook three Israelis for militiamen. It opened fire in their direction and they were killed. Immediately,' the spokesman added, 'we suspected a mistake. Their bodies were transferred to Israel for recognition'. The army immediately launched an investigation to establish the exact dynamics of the incident. The news of the death of the three hostages caused protests and discontent throughout Israel. Dozens of people demonstrated in front of the military headquarters in Tel Aviv. The demonstrators held placards with the names and photos of several other hostages, demanding their immediate release.

Seventy-two days after that tragic Hamas attack, almost 19,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza authorities; over 1,200 civilians and military personnel died in that tragic 7 October, and at least 110 Jewish soldiers have fallen since fighting began on 27 October. A very heavy toll.

But also in the West Bank the climate is about to go over the top. It seems that in Jenin, Israeli soldiers are now acting without rules of engagement. It was a few days ago that a soldier, together with other fellow soldiers, after entering a mosque in the city, took and activated a microphone to recite a Jewish prayer. A gesture that Muslims judged as a provocation. After all, people continue to die in Jenin. Even yesterday, Sunday, a young man was killed. Laith Abu Al-Nimr died of wounds caused by fragments of a bullet fired from a drone at a group of young people in the eastern quarter of the city. The number of Palestinians killed in the West Bank rises to 294. In Jerusalem, security forces prevent dozens of men and young people from praying in the al-Aqsa Mosque, yet they allow ultra-Orthodox Jewish settlers to enter the esplanade to say their

prayers.

In the face of all this suffering, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Patriarch of Jerusalem of the Latins, urges Christians to "pray for all the innocent victims. The suffering of the innocent before God has a precious and redemptive value, because it is united to the redemptive suffering of Christ. May their suffering bring peace ever closer and not contribute to generating more hatred!".