

MIDDLE EAST

Pizzaballa visits Gaza taking aid. "Stop this senseless war."

WORLD

19_07_2025

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This time, diplomacy took action immediately following the Israeli army's attack on the only Catholic parish in the Gaza Strip. According to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, it was a mistake on the part of the tank gunners. Nonetheless, the error resulted in the

deaths of three people and the injuries of nine others, including parish priest Gabriel Romanelli. Among the seriously injured was Suheil, a postulate of the Institute of the Incarnate Word (IVE). The news spread around the world in a flash. The condemnation was unanimous. Why would they strike and kill innocent people? The Christian community in the Holy Land remains shocked and appalled.

Friday morning at 5:30 a.m., Patriarch Pier Battista Pizzaballa and Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilus III left for Gaza. After obtaining authorisation from the Israeli government, they embarked on a mission to demonstrate solidarity and support for the Christian community in Gaza. They were accompanied by 500 tons of humanitarian aid intended for parishioners and the Muslim population. The Patriarchate guaranteed the transfer of the wounded to health facilities outside Gaza where they will receive adequate medical care.

During the less-than-100-kilometer journey from Jerusalem to Gaza, Patriarch Pizzaballa received a phone call from Pope Francis. The Pope thanked the cardinal for his efforts and asked about the situation in the Strip. The pope also inquired about the condition of Father Romanelli and the other wounded individuals. Pizzaballa reported that Pope Francis "repeated several times that it is time to put an end to this massacre and that what has happened is unjustifiable. We must ensure that there are no more victims. On behalf of the Latin Patriarchate and all the Churches of the Holy Land, we thank His Holiness for his support and prayers. We also guarantee our prayers and gratitude on behalf of the entire Gaza community."

As the delegation was about to cross the border into Gaza, Prime Minister Netanyahu called the Pope. The conversation lasted almost an hour. During this time, the Holy Father reiterated his call for renewed negotiations, a ceasefire, and an end to the war. He also expressed his continued concern for the tragic humanitarian situation of the population, in which children, the elderly, and the sick are paying the highest price.

Netanyahu, for his part, expressed regret at what had happened. He reported that a stray bullet had hit the Church of the Holy Family. Every innocent life lost is a tragedy. The prime minister shared the pain of the families and the faithful, assuring them that "the Israeli authorities are committed to clarifying what happened." During the call, Netanyahu invited Pope Francis to Israel.

Meanwhile, the deaths in Gaza continue. Yesterday morning, 35 people were killed in Israeli army attacks. The city of Khan Yunis was hit, including the al-Shafi mosque. A tent city for displaced persons in the Mu'asi area was bombed as well. Rescue workers

reported that five members of the same family were killed and ten were wounded in an artillery attack. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that one of its employees was injured when a tent camp in Khan Yunis was bombed.

The Israeli army has increased its use of drones in recent days. These Chinese-made unmanned aircraft, which were intended for civilian use, have been modified and adapted by the Israeli army for military use. The army uses them in targeted attacks against the population to force the inhabitants of Gaza to abandon the area where they have found refuge and move elsewhere. Moreover, there is a growing belief within the Palestinian Catholic community that the Israelis' ultimate goal is to evacuate the northern Gaza Strip and drive out its inhabitants, including Christians, who have so far refused to leave. Once the parish buildings are abandoned, those who have found refuge there will be exposed and defenseless. Above all, they will be unable to return.

The demolition of buildings continues, and razing the skeletons of houses has become a profitable business. Private soldiers hired by the Star of David army are given bulldozers, and they receive \$1,500 for each building they demolish. In this way, Prime Minister Netanyahu is carrying out what he has reiterated on more than one occasion: "We must destroy everything in Gaza, Especially the houses. That way, people will not be able to return to their homes."

Patriarch Pizzaballa replies: "It is time to stop this war, which has always been absurd, but which is now even more senseless."