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Vatican City â?? October 14, 2024

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Pope Francis called again for "an immediate cease-fire on all fronts" in the Middle East, urging leaders to "pursue the paths of diplomacy and dialogue to achieve peace."

The pope made the appeal Oct. 13 after leading the recitation of the Angelus prayer with visitors in St. Peter's Square.

A year after Hamas militants attacked Israel, killing and taking hundreds of hostages, Israel's retaliation and attack on Gaza continues. Fighting has expanded to the Israeli-Lebanese border, with Hezbollah militants firing on northern Israel and Israel invading southern Lebanon and bombing Hezbollah positions in Beirut. Iran, which supports Hezbollah, fired ballistic missiles at Israel Oct. 1 and Israel was expected to retaliate.

All forces involved have inflicted death and hardship on civilians.

After reciting the Angelus, Francis told the crowd, "I am close to all the populations involved, in Palestine, Israel and Lebanon, where I ask the United Nations peacekeeping forces to be respected."

Several U.N. peacekeepers were wounded in Lebanon in the days before Francis spoke; it was not clear who was responsible, but Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on the United Nations Oct. 13 to move the peacekeepers from the border area, claiming Hezbollah was using the peacekeepers and their bases as shields.

While Francis prayed for "all the victims (and) for the displaced" throughout the region, he also repeated his call for Hamas to release the hostages they took a year ago.

"I hope that this great pointless suffering, engendered by hatred and revenge, will end soon," the pope said.

"Brothers and sisters, war is an illusion, it is a defeat: it will never lead to peace, it will never lead to security, it is a defeat for all, especially for those who believe they are invincible," he said. "Stop, please!"

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Two days after meeting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Francis also appealed for peace and humanitarian assistance for the victims of Russia's war on Ukraine.

"I appeal for the Ukrainians not to be left to freeze to death," he said, referring to the approach of winter and Russia's destruction of power plants and gas supply lines. "Stop the airstrikes against the civilian population, which is always the most affected. Stop the killing of innocent people!"

Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, the pope's envoy for peace in Ukraine, arrived in Moscow Oct. 14 to speak with government officials "to facilitate the family reunification of Ukrainian children" forcibly taken to Russia and about "the exchange of prisoners, with a view to achieving the much hoped-for peace," said Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office.

Francis also told the crowd that he is following the "dramatic situation in Haiti" where extreme gang violence "continues against the population, forced to flee from their own homes in search of safety elsewhere, inside and outside the country."

Since 2020 Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, has been the scene of ferocious gang battles, and since February most of the capital has been in the control of gang members. But the violence is spreading. In the town of Pont-SondÃ© Oct. 3 gang members killed at least 115 people and caused more than 6,000 people to flee their homes.

"I ask everyone to pray for an end to all forms of violence" in Haiti, Francis said, and he encouraged the international community "to continue working to build peace and reconciliation in the country, always defending the dignity and rights of all."