

# Pope Francis decries Gaza’s ‘appalling harvest’ of deaths

## Defends rights of migrants around world

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis said in his Christmas message yesterday that children dying in wars, including in Gaza, are the “little Jesuses of today” and that Israeli strikes there were reaping an “appalling harvest” of innocent civilians.

In his Christmas Day “Urbi et Orbi” (to the city and world) address from the central balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica to thousands of people in the square below, he took another swipe at the armaments industry, saying it ultimately controlled the “puppet-strings of war”.

The 87-year-old Francis, celebrating the 11th Christmas of his pontificate, called for an end to conflicts, political, social or military, in places including Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and he defended the rights of migrants around the world.

“How many innocents are being slaughtered in our world! In their mothers’ wombs, in odysseys undertaken in desperation and in search of hope, in the lives of all those little ones whose childhood has been devastated by war. They are the little Jesuses of today,” he



said. He gave particular attention to the Holy Land, including Gaza, where, according to Palestinian health officials, Israeli air strikes killed at least 78 people in one of the besieged enclave’s deadliest nights of Israel’s 11-week-old battle with Hamas.

“May it (peace) come in Israel and Palestine, where war is devastating the lives of those peoples. I embrace them all, particularly the Christian communities of Gaza and the entire Holy Land,” Francis said.

Speaking from the same balcony where he first appeared to the world on the night of his election on March 13, 2013, he said his “heart grieves for the victims of the abominable attack of 7 October” and again called for the release of hostages.

“I plead for an end to the military operations with their appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims, and call for a solution to the desperate humanitarian situation by an opening to the provision of humanitarian aid,” he said.

Last week, a UN-backed body said in a report that the entire 2.3 million population of Gaza was facing crisis levels of hunger and that the risk of famine was increasing every day.



Relatives lament next to the bodies of Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes, at a hospital in the central Gaza Strip yesterday. Since a week-long truce collapsed at the start of the month, fighting has only intensified on the ground, with war spreading from the north to the full length of the densely populated strip.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## GAZA HOSPITALS

# Desperation rising amid acute hunger

## WHO warns

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organization said it led missions to barely functioning hospitals in northern Gaza at the weekend, describing growing desperation and starving people stripping an aid truck of supplies.

The UN health agency and its partners delivered aid, including fuel, to the devastated Al Shifa hospital, once Gaza’s biggest and most advanced medical facility, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said late Sunday on X, formerly Twitter.

What the participants in the December 23 mission witnessed was “rising desperation due to acute hunger,” Tedros said.

“Partners demand immediate scale-up of food and water to ensure population health and stability.”

At Al Shifa, Tedros warned that “relentless hostilities and massive numbers of wounded people have brought its capacities to its knees”.

He voiced hope that Saturday’s delivery of 19,200 litres of generator fuel would help revive vital services at the hospital, which can currently only provide “the most basic of first aid”.

But, he stressed, “more will be needed”.

Sean Casey, a WHO Emergency Medical Teams coordinator, described overflowing surgery wards and being unable to evaluate al Shifa’s operating theatres, “because there are people inside and they are not opening the door”.

## ISRAEL-GAZA WAR

# Palestinians recount ‘torture’ in army custody

AFP, Rafah

Palestinians held by the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip had suffered torture, two freed detainees and a medic said Sunday, a charged denied by the military.

The two men were among hundreds detained by Israeli forces over alleged links with Hamas during Israel’s ongoing ground offensive in the besieged Hamas-run territory.

About 20 men released from Israeli custody “have bruises and marks of blows on their bodies”, Marwan al-Hams, hospital director in the southern city of Rafah, told AFP.

Hams said the freed Palestinians were admitted to Al Najjar hospital upon their release. The Israeli army rejected the claims, saying detainees are “treated in accordance with international law”.

“While detained, the suspects are given sufficient food and water and treated according to protocol,” the army told AFP in a statement.

Nayef Ali, 22, said he was detained in Gaza City’s eastern Zaitun suburb and later taken to an Israeli detention facility, and showed cuts on his wrists and other parts of his body.

“They (Israeli troops) tied our hands behind our backs for two days,” he said.

“We were not allowed to eat or drink, neither were we allowed to use the toilet,” he added. “There were only beatings and beatings.”

Ali said the detainees were put in an area along the border with Israel where it was “freezing cold”.

“They threw cold water on us before transferring us to a prison, where it was again torture and beatings.”

Khamis al-Bardini, 55, also alleged torture by Israeli soldiers, saying they

poured “cold water on our heads through the night” along with “beatings during the day”.

In recent weeks, the army has faced international criticism after viral footage of detainees stripped down to their underwear and blindfolded with their hands tied behind the backs.

The army has said it was investigating the deaths of “terrorists in military detention centres” after Israeli media reported that several detainees had died in custody.

The war has heightened tensions across the Middle East, where Israel faces a range of enemies – Iran-backed armed groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen that have voiced support for Hamas.

Cross-border fire has erupted almost daily between Israel and Lebanon’s powerful Hezbollah movement.

And Yemen’s Huthi rebels have fired at cargo vessels in the Red Sea, leading the United States to build a naval taskforce to deter the missile and drone strikes.

Iran yesterday rejected US accusations that a drone strike targeting a Japanese-owned chemical tanker off the coast of India had been fired from its territory.

“Such claims are aimed at... covering up for the full support of the American government for the crimes of the Zionist regime (Israel) in Gaza,” said foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani.

Nassem Mohra, a 10-year-old kidney patient, fears he may never see his family

again after Israeli forces arrested his father while he was taking the boy to a hospital in southern Gaza for urgent dialysis treatment, reports Reuters.

A neighbour brought Nassem, who needs regular dialysis treatment, to Abu Yousef Al Najjar hospital in Rafah on Sunday after the boy was separated from his relatives amid continued heavy Israeli bombardment of Gaza.

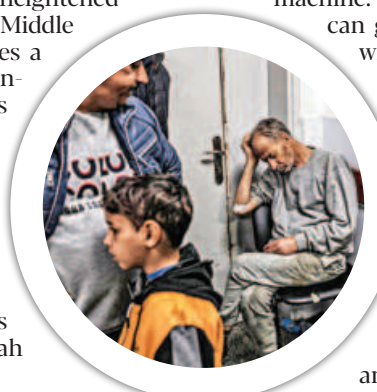
“I am afraid to die before seeing my family and relatives, and my siblings,” Nassem said, hooked up to a dialysis machine. “I want the war to end so we can go back to our homes and I will be back to my normal life,” he said, adding he had not seen his mother in weeks.

The neighbour, Adel Haniyeh, said he had been travelling south through Gaza with his own children when he recognised Nassem and agreed to take care of him. The boy’s father had been arrested at an Israeli army checkpoint, he said.

“The boy is in a bad condition. He needs special food, his situation is very bad. We sleep at a mosque, and we come here (daily) on donkey carts,” Haniyeh said, describing how they had to wait in line for hours to access the dialysis treatment.

The Palestinian Red Crescent has said Israeli bombardment of main roads across Gaza has seriously hindered the passage of ambulances and other emergency vehicles.

Doctors at the hospital in Rafah, near the Egyptian border, said fuel shortages and insufficient medical supplies were making working conditions there very difficult.



## West trying to ‘destabilise’ Serbia: Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday accused Western countries of stirring up tensions in Serbia, a Moscow-friendly Balkan nation that has been rocked by protests over alleged fraud in elections held on December 17.

Just a day before, demonstrators tried to storm the Belgrade city hall. Protestors reject the results of parliamentary and local elections in which President Aleksandar Vucic’s party said it secured a commanding victory.

“The attempts of the collective West to destabilise the situation in the country are obvious,” foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told state-run news agency RIA Novosti.

The Kremlin had welcomed election results, with spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying Moscow hoped the result would lead to the “further strengthening of friendship” between the countries.

Serbia and Russia have historically close ties and Belgrade did not join international sanctions against Moscow for its Ukraine offensive.

## Japan moon lander enters lunar orbit

AFP, Tokyo

Japan’s SLIM space probe entered the Moon’s orbit yesterday in a major step towards the country’s first successful lunar landing, expected next month. The Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) is nicknamed the “Moon Sniper” because it is designed to land within 100 metres (328 feet) of a specific target on the lunar surface. If successful, the touchdown would make Japan only the fifth country to have successfully landed a probe on the Moon, after the United States, Russia, China and India. Yesterday, SLIM “successfully entered the moon’s orbit at 04:51 pm Japan time” (0751 GMT), the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a statement. “Its trajectory shift was achieved as originally planned, and there is nothing out of the ordinary about the probe’s conditions,” the agency said. The lander’s descent towards the moon is expected to start around 12:00 am Japan time on January 20, with its landing on the surface scheduled for 20 minutes later, JAXA said. The H-IIA rocket lifted off in September from the southern island of Tanegashima carrying the lander, after three postponements linked to bad weather. JAXA said this month that the mission would be an “unprecedentedly high precision landing” on the Moon. The lander is equipped with a spherical probe that was developed with a toy company. Slightly bigger than a tennis ball, it can change its shape to move on the lunar surface. Compared to previous probes that landed “a few or 10 plus kilometres” away from targets, SLIM’s purported margin of error of under 100 metres suggests a level of accuracy once thought impossible, thanks to the culmination of a 20-year effort by researchers, according to JAXA.

## Sudanese in ‘total panic’ as paramilitaries move south

AFP, Al-Jazira State



On a countryside road in battle-ravaged Sudan, the hum of a passing vehicle turns villagers’ blood cold, fearing the arrival of paramilitaries plundering their way south in their war against the army. “They’ve created a state of total panic,” said Rabab, who lives in a village north of Wad Madani, the Al-Jazira state capital and latest site of fierce battles between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Like others AFP spoke to, she requested to be identified by first name only out of fear of retaliation from fighters who have consistently targeted civilians during more than eight months of war. On Saturday at least eight people were killed by RSF fighters in a village in Al-Jazira state, witnesses told AFP, saying they had been shot after trying to stop their looting. Just south of Khartoum, more than half a million people had sought shelter in Al-Jazira after the fighting overwhelmed the Sudanese capital. This month, however, paramilitaries pressed deeper into the state and shattered one of the country’s few remaining sanctuaries, forcing more than 300,000 people to flee once again, the United Nations said. Those who remain – unable or unwilling to leave – have found themselves in what the Red Cross has called “another death trap”. Since April 15, Sudan has been gripped by a war pitting army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan against his former deputy, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo.



Police officers cover the door of the city hall as a protester raises a stick during a protest by supporters of the opposition ‘Serbia Against Violence’ (SPN), after the SPN alleged major election law violations in the Belgrade city and parliament races, in Belgrade, Serbia on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS