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Women react outside St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza Oct. 20 after an explosion went off the night before. Several hundred people had been sheltering at the church complex, many of them sleeping, at the time of the explosion. The Hamas Ministry of Interior in Gaza blamed the explosion on an Israeli airstrike but responsibility for it had not yet been independently verified. (OSV News/Reuters/Mohammed Al-Masri)



Judith Sudilovsky

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Jerusalem — October 23, 2023

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For Mother María del Pilar Llerena Vargas, "it was an image that will be very difficult to erase."

The Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word from Peru, who is serving in the Catholic parish in Gaza, recalled the pain of watching the funeral of Christians killed in an Oct. 19 blast at a Greek Orthodox church.

Children laid to rest their parents and parents buried their little children after an Israel bombing of a Hamas target next to the Greek Orthodox church caused the collapse of a two-story building in the church complex.

"Some of those children attended the different activities of our parish. They were well-known families and very close to us," Mother María said in a recorded testimony sent to OSV News.

One father was uncovered from the rubble with no sign of life, parish priest Fr. Gabriel Romanelli said in an Oct. 22 WhatsApp update, but protected by his body, his little child was found still alive. Romanelli was stranded in Bethlehem when the war broke out Oct. 7, and has been in constant contact with his parish since then.

Heartbreaking images were circulated in social media of young married couples and children who died under the rubble. Caritas said they "were devastated to learn of the death of our colleague Viola, 26-Year-old, who was killed alongside her husband and their infant daughter in an airstrike attack on the St. Porphyrios (Greek) Orthodox Church in Gaza," the Oct. 20 statement from the organization said. "May they rest in peace."

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The church provided refuge for around 500 people, including five dedicated members of Caritas staff, along with their families, Caritas wrote.

Mother María said the Catholic Holy Family Parish offered medical help to some of the people who received minor injuries in the blast and later received many of the Christians who had sought shelter at the St. Porphyrios Church. Some 700 people were now sheltering at the Holy Family Parish church complex, she said, including families, elderly and the 50 disabled children under the care of the Missionaries of Charity sisters.

"We serve everyone," she said. "We very charitably seek to ensure that everyone receives what they need in the best possible way."

People at the parish are currently without electricity and drinking water, and are using the water from their well, but they don't know how long it will last, she said. They have bought mineral water at triple the original price so people will have drinking water, she added.

The parish celebrates Mass twice a day, Mother María said, and people are "constantly praying the rosary asking the Virgin and God for that peace we long for." She called for believers everywhere to join in their prayers "So that God in his mercy grants it to us, since only He can do this great miracle."

In an Oct. 20 letter of appeal for donations to provide help to the Gaza parish, Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem CEO Sami El-Yousef said providing the care for the many people who reach the church seeking shelter since the beginning of the war two weeks ago has been "a great responsibility."

"The human stories are incredibly tragic, and I am truly shaken as I personally know many of them from my frequent visits," he said, noting that some of the dead were participants in the patriarchate's job creation program. "We are simply overwhelmed, and the means available to us are being depleted quickly."



Debris surrounds St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza Oct. 20 after an explosion went off the night before. (OSV News/Reuters/Mohammed Al-Masri)

Israel launched airstrikes on Hamas targets in Gaza, which according to the Hamas Ministry of Health has killed over 3,700 people, following a surprise Hamas terrorist attack against civilians in Israel's southern agricultural communities on Oct. 7 that left some 1,400 people brutally murdered and over 200 taken captive into Gaza.

According to the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, as of Oct. 19 more than 7,000 rockets and mortar shells have been fired at Israel, with about 10% of the launches being unsuccessful and falling back into the Gaza Strip.

The Iran-backed Hezbollah organization in the north also has launched rockets into northern Israeli communities, and the Israeli government arranged an organized evacuation of some 22,000 people from the northern city of Kiryat Shmona Oct. 20 as Israel prepared for a possible two-front war.

On Oct. 21 Hamas released two American-Israeli hostages, mother and daughter Judith and Natalie Raanan from Evanston, Illinois, through negotiations by the U.S. and Qatar.

El-Yousef noted that the patriarchate already had a list of post-war needs it would have to be prepared for including psychosocial programs, fixing structural damages to any of their immediate institutions and homes of Christian parishioners, rental support as well as cash support and food and hygiene products. The war has also been seriously affecting people in the West Bank, where the closed borders mean many people are unable to go to their jobs in Jerusalem, he said.

"Unemployment will rise dramatically and so will humanitarian suffering for a long time to come," he said. "Alternative livelihood support and empowerment programs will be devised to help our people cope so they do not consider emigration."

Caritas Jerusalem said it has an emergency plan ready to assist the population as soon as the situation allows for it.

The Rafah crossing with Egypt briefly opened Oct. 21 to allow the first convoy of aid trucks to enter the besieged Gaza Strip. Rights groups welcomed the short reopening, but stressed that more aid is desperately needed in Gaza, where conditions continue to deteriorate. On Oct. 22 and 23, two more convoys of aid were allowed into Gaza.