News

U.S. Capitol Police officers arrest several Catholic activists during a witness inside the Hart Senate Office Building on Nov. 9 to call for an Israel-Hamas cease-fire. At bottom, in purple, is Jean Stokan, justice coordinator for immigration and nonviolence for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. At right, in a blue shirt, is Eli McCarthy, just peace fellow for the Franciscan Action Network. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

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Five Catholic activists were arrested in a U.S. Senate office building on Nov. 9, as part of a witness calling on American politicians to push for a cease-fire in the ongoing Israeli war against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip.

"We come here to stop the mass slaughter," said Eli McCarthy, just peace fellow for the Franciscan Action Network, while opening the witness. "War is trauma. It is not justice."

At least 10,818 people in Gaza have been killed since Israel began retaliatory airstrikes and a military campaign in Gaza after Hamas killed at least 1,400 people in Israel in a series of attacks on Oct. 7, according to their respective governments.

On Nov. 6, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Gaza was becoming "a graveyard for children," referencing the some 4,104 children who had been killed at that point.

Inside the lobby of the Hart Senate Office Building on Nov. 9, a group of about 30 people gathered at around 12:30 p.m. and formed a semicircle together. They spoke about the killing of civilians in Gaza, and urged members of Congress to call for a cease-fire.

U.S. Capitol Police officers are seen surrounding Catholic activists holding a witness inside the Hart Senate Office Building on Nov. 9 to call for an Israel-Hamas cease-fire. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

"We pray for a release of the hostages. We pray for an end to all U.S. military aid that will go to Israel, that it be stopped immediately," said Art Laffin of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker community in Washington, speaking later outside the building.

Hamas kidnapped about 240 hostages in the Oct. 7 attacks, and only five have been released or rescued.

Laffin continued, "We know that there is no military solution to this conflict. Pope Francis had it right when he said that the only side that we can take is the side of peace."

Francis called for a cease-fire on Oct. 29 and has repeatedly said, "War is always a defeat."

So far, 23 of the 435 members of the House of Representatives have publicly called for a cease-fire, according to Prem Thakker, a reporter at The Intercept. Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, a Catholic, is the only senator known to have publicly called for a cease-fire.

The protestors inside the Hart building had planned to say several prayers and hear from a number of speakers as part of their witness. But as one of the speakers, Palestinian Christian Philip Farah, began to talk, U.S. Capitol Police officers at the scene read multiple warnings in short succession against protesting in the building.

Activists lay down to form a cross on the floor of the Hart Senate Office Building on Nov. 9 to call for an Israel-Hamas cease-fire. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

Event organizers then asked those not intending to be arrested to move back from the scene. Five of the activists laid on the ground in the form of a cross, and were then arrested and escorted away from the scene. One of the arrested activists said later that the five were detained for processing for about 90 minutes.

Protesters expressed surprise about how fast the warnings about possible arrests began after the beginning of their witness. Organizers had planned to delay displaying banners, singing or using amplification to defer risking arrest until completing more of their program.

"I thought we would be able to at least even finish our prayer, but it was stopped so quickly," said Maryknoll Sr. Susan Nchubiri.

"I've never seen a group get cleared out so quickly," said Jane Varner Malhotra, who said she has been protesting at the Capitol for the over 20 years that she has lived in the D.C. area.

Varner Malhotra said the timing of the warnings, which prevented Farah, a Palestinian, from speaking, were "really symbolic of what's happening to people, not only Palestinians, but anyone who cares about the voice" of Palestinians.

Philip Farah, a Palestinian Christian, begins to speak at a witness inside the Hart Senate Office Building on Nov. 9 to call for an Israel-Hamas cease-fire. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

U.S. Capitol Police guidelines say: "Any display of signs, banners, placards, and related items is strictly prohibited inside all Congressional Buildings."

Brianna Burch, of the public information office of the U.S. Capitol Police, told NCR in an email, "5 people were arrested for D.C. Code § 22–1307 - Crowding, Obstructing, or Incommoding – for illegally protesting inside a Congressional Office Building."

After the arrests, the larger group of protesters left the Hart building, walking together and singing "seek peace and pursue it," and "no more killing, no more war." The group continued their witness outside, hearing from Farah, and saying the Lord's Prayer together and singing.

Maryknoll Sr. Susan Nchubiri, Judith Kelly and Kirstin De Mello knock on the door of Rep. Rashida Tlaib's office to deliver a chain of paper cranes on Nov. 9 (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

The protesters concluded by breaking into groups to go and try to speak with members of Congress. One group of five protesters took a chain of paper cranes to the office of Michigan Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian American member of Congress.

Tlaib has called for a cease-fire and was censured by the House of Representatives on Nov. 7 for her rhetoric on Israel, including using the slogan, "from the river to the sea," and calling for an end to "the apartheid system that creates the suffocating, dehumanizing conditions that can lead to resistance."

The Nov. 9 pray-in at the Senate followed a similar Nov. 2 prayer event outside the White House, which focused on asking President Joe Biden to call for a cease-fire.

The pray-in at the Senate office building was co-sponsored by a number of groups, including: Churches for Middle East Peace (or CMEP), Catholic Advisory Council of CMEP, Franciscan Action Network, Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Pax Christi USA, Quixote Center, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team, the Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna, the Isaiah Project, the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker, and the Assisi Community.

As Nchubiri reflected on the protest, she said, "I find with elected officials that they say that they care for civilians. They want civilians' lives to be protected, while they are sending weapons that will be used to kill the same civilians."

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