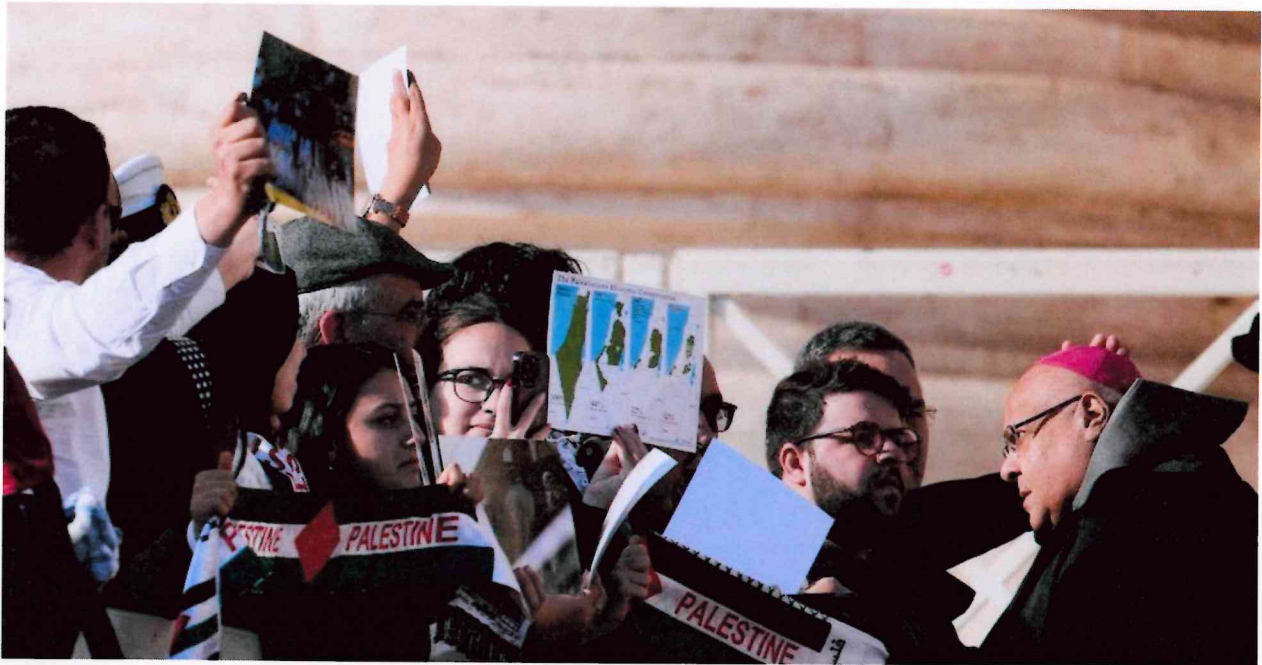


Pope Francis meets with relatives of Israeli hostages and Palestinians living in Gaza

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By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press
November 22, 2023, 10:54 AM



VIDEO LIVE SHOWS ELECTION 2024 538

Members of Palestinian community attend at the Pope Francis weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Wednesday, Nov. 22, 2023. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

The Associated Press

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Francis met separately Wednesday with relatives of Israeli hostages in Gaza and Palestinians living through the war and set off a firestorm by using words that Vatican diplomats usually avoid: "terrorism" and, according to the Palestinians, "genocide."

Francis spoke about the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians after his meetings, which were arranged before the Israeli-Hamas hostage deal and a temporary halt in fighting was announced. Francis didn't refer to the deal, which marked the biggest diplomatic breakthrough since the war erupted following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel.

Francis met at the Vatican with 12 relatives of some of the 240 hostages held by Hamas in Gaza for about 20 minutes. Separately, he met for about the same amount of time with 10 Palestinians whose relatives have been killed or otherwise affected by the war in Gaza, along with priests who minister there.

Francis spoke about the meetings at the end of his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, where some people in the VIP seats wearing Palestinian scarves held up small posters showing bodies in a ditch and the word "Genocide" written underneath.

"Here we've gone beyond war. This isn't war anymore, this is terrorism," Francis told the crowd. "Please, let us go ahead with peace. Pray for peace, pray a lot for peace."

00:06

00:36

He also asked for God to help both Israeli and Palestinian people “resolve problems and not go ahead with passions that are killing everyone in the end.”

Francis has spoken out repeatedly calling for an end to the war and has tried to maintain the Vatican's typical diplomatic neutrality in conflicts. The Vatican is particularly concerned about the plight of Christians in Gaza.

The Hamas attack last month killed about 1,200 people in Israel. Israel's retaliatory strikes on Gaza have killed more than 11,000 people, according to Palestinian health authorities.

Members of the Palestinian delegation said they were stunned by Francis' deep knowledge of the toll the war has taken on the people of Gaza and said he used the term “genocide” to describe it during their private meeting.

No journalists were present during either meeting.

“He knew that Gaza has no water,” said Shireen Hilal, who lives in Bethlehem in the West Bank but was part of the delegation. “He knew that there was no electricity. He knew that there is no medicine.”

The Vatican spokesman, Matteo Bruni, said he didn't believe that Francis used that term.

“He used the terms he used during the general audience and regardless represent the terrible situation that Gaza is living,” Bruni said.

But the Palestinians doubled down. “Ten people heard it,” said another member of the delegation, Suhair Anastas, who left Gaza in the last week with her daughter, among those allowed to leave because she also holds a Canadian passport.

Francis often causes diplomatic kerfluffles with his off-hand comments. He has used the term “genocide” before in reference to the Ottoman-era Turkish attacks on Armenians and, more casually, agreed when asked if the Catholic abuses against Indigenous peoples in Canada amounted to a genocide