

Christ under Rubble



By Zohreh Qanadi
Staff writer

"If Jesus were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza." This is an excerpt from a congratulatory speech delivered by a Palestinian Christian theologian Munther Isaac. Christmas Eve in Gaza marked one of the enclave's deadliest nights in the 11-week-old war, with 100 lives lost in Israeli airstrikes. Heart-wrenching scenes unfolded: One man hugged a dead child and others were hysterical. Gaza remains entrenched in bloodshed, hunger, and rubble, with over 20,000 casualties and many bodies feared trapped beneath the debris. Almost all of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced. Miles away in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus (PBUH), there was little for Christians to celebrate. Palestinian Christians earli-

er held a Christmas vigil in Bethlehem, West Bank, with candle-lit hymns and prayers for peace in Gaza instead of the usual celebrations. Hamas commended the Palestinian Christians' decision to limit their Christmas celebrations to religious rituals, saying, "The holidays of our Christian people come this year amid a continuing fascist aggression launched by the occupation (forces) against all components of our Palestinian people, targeting both mosques and churches." "We appreciate the position of the Christians of our honorable national Palestinian people who limit their celebrations this year ... and stand united with our people in the Gaza Strip, which is subjected to brutal Zionist aggression," the statement said. It added that the decision "confirms that our people ... Muslims and Christians alike, are united on the path of resilience, preserving their identity, and protecting their Islamic and Christian sanctities."

There were no trees, no lights, no choirs or celebrations for the first time in Palestine's history since the Nakba of 1948. Nativity figurines in churches were placed amid rubble and barbed wire in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Instead of a manger, at the Lutheran church in Bethlehem, the baby Jesus lies swaddled in a keffiyeh, half buried in a pile of rubble. Many here have ties to Gaza through loved ones and friends, and a sense of misery has fallen upon the city revered by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus Christ (PBUH). Decorations that once adorned neighborhoods have been removed. The parades and religious celebrations have been canceled. "It's impossible to celebrate when there's a massacre, a genocide, taking place in Gaza with our people," Pastor Munther Isaac tells Al Jazeera. Ali Thabet tells CNN: "My son asked me why there's no Christmas tree this year, I

don't know how to explain it." Father Spiridon Sammour, a Greek Orthodox priest at the Church of the Nativity says, "I have never seen it like this." "Christmas is joy, love, and peace. We have no peace. We have no joy," he says solemnly. "It is out of our hands, and we pray for the leaders who will make the decisions all over the world, to God to help them, give them his light to make peace here and all over the world." In the US, the home to the world's largest population of Christians, some Christians are following suit. "The only gift that Palestinians want to have is a Christmas cease-fire," said the Rev. Khader Khalila, who grew up in Bethlehem, and is now at The Redeemer-St John's Lutheran church in Brooklyn. Khalila will not be exchanging gifts this year, even with his own two children, and will instead donate money to organizations helping children in Gaza and rebuilding efforts. "It's impossible to celebrate" resonates as a sentiment, re-

flecting the grim reality of the Gaza war and exposing divisions among US Christians. A very different letter was sent to President Joe Biden on November 9 from Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) and 30 American Christian leaders, calling for the administration to "support an immediate cease-fire, de-escalation, and restraint by all involved". It was signed by representatives of the Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, United, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches, among others. In his Christmas message on Monday, Pope Francis kicked off global Christmas celebrations with a call for peace, as the war cast a shadow over one of the world's favorite holidays. "Tonight, our hearts are in Bethlehem, where the Prince of Peace is once more rejected by the futile logic of war, by the clash of arms that even today prevents him from finding room in the world," the Catholic leader said. He said 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. "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 told thousands of faithful gathered in Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, in a message to the pontiff on Sunday, urged "the international community and all the truthful people of the world" to help bring an "immediate end" to the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip in the New Year. Raisi said Israel killed thousands of innocent people in Gaza amid the inaction of international organizations and the support of the US and some European nations. The Latin patriarch of Al-Quds (Jerusalem), Pierbattis-



The Christmas nativity scene at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem this year. © GETTY IMAGES

ta Pizzaballa, arrived Sunday at the Church of the Nativity, clad in the traditional black and white keffiyeh. "Our heart goes to Gaza, to all people in Gaza but a special attention to our Christian community in Gaza who is suffering," he said. Yet, the world remains shrouded in silence. Amidst the chaos, the only discernible sounds are only empty calls for cease-fire. Churches stand as silent witnesses, leaders observe without decisive action, and the people in Gaza 'are sending live images of their own execution'. As the Palestinian Christian theologian said during his Christmas sermon "The Christmas message is not about Santa, trees, gifts, lights." The true message of Christmas would be that "this genocide must stop now."

Christians mourn for Gaza



By Robert Beglarian
Iranian Christian MP

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

This year, celebrating Christian festivities and the upcoming New Year has



Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



been eclipsed by the war in Gaza and the inhumane massacre of Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli regime. Any fair human, regardless of their political or religious views, cannot stay indifferent to what has happened in the last three months in the Gaza Strip. How timeless are the famous lines that the Iranian poet Sa'di wrote centuries ago, which translate as follows: "Human beings are members of a whole

In creation of one essence and soul
If one member is afflicted with pain
Other members uneasy will remain"

Christians in Bethlehem, which is the birthplace of Jesus Christ in the West Bank, were not alone in marking these days not as a time for celebration but as a time for mourning. Palestinian Christians, wherever they were around the world, grieved the grueling deaths and displacement of their fellow innocent children, women, and men. Palestine has always been home to Christians, Muslims, and Jews who were happy to have a peaceful co-existence for years, only to see their peace broken following the emergence of Zionism there. It seems that these days, no one can really feel the negative and inhumane aspects of the Israeli regime as well as its clear clashes with the divine teachings of Abrahamic religions in their bones better than Christian Palestinians residing in the occupied territories. As such, these Christians must not be indifferent to the Israeli oppression of Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip. That's what we have seen: this year's festivities in Bethlehem have been imbued with expressions of sympathy with the Muslims of Gaza and bereft of the joyous celebrations that were the norm for many years. Celebrations and events were

held across the world, but they were either limited in scale or accompanied by sympathies with Gazan Muslims and, in some cases, criticism of the global silence toward Israeli crimes. Christians had condemned past Israeli genocides in Gaza as well. Iranian Christians, just like other peoples of faith, are moved by the extreme oppression of Palestinians, and this will be reflected in their special plans for the upcoming New Year's Eve. Surely, they will not forget the people of Palestine in their prayers. Thanks to the work of various media outlets as well as social media, the ongoing genocide of Israel in Gaza has not been overlooked. Therefore, it is only natural that New Year's Eve will be significantly affected by the people's response to that genocide. Describing the atrocities that he witnessed in Gaza, Father Munther Isaac started his address during the service at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem by saying, "If Jesus were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza." In the Christian faith, the resurrection is a major event. Three days and three nights after Christ was crucified, his rock tomb was opened, but there was no sign of Christ's body, signaling that he had been resurrected. A religious and apocalyptic message is embedded in this. I think that the Bethlehem pastor wanted to say that the extent of Israel's killings and destruction in Gaza is such that it is as if Israel wants to stop the resurrection and prevent the words of Abrahamic religions from being heard.

IRGC vows revenge after Israeli strike kills officer in Syria



International Desk

A senior officer of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps has been killed in an Israeli "missile strike" in a suburb of the Syrian capital, Damascus, the IRGC said in a statement on Monday. Seyyed Razi Mousavi, a veteran brigadier general who was serving as a military adviser in Syria, was one of the close companions of the assassinated Iranian commander, Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, Tasnim News Agency reported. "The usurping, savage Israeli regime would undoubtedly pay for this crime," the IRGC statement read. On December 2, 2023, two IRGC brigadier generals, named Mohammed-Ali Ataei and Panah Taghizadeh, were killed after Israel bombed the same Sayyidah Zaynab neighborhood of Damascus.