



Pope urges Russia, Ukraine dialogue in Christmas blessing

Pope addresses humanitarian crises in Gaza and calls for an end to war

- Pope condemns “senselessness” of war
- Bethlehem marks festive return

AFP | Washington

Pope Leo XIV yesterday urged Russia and Ukraine to find the “courage” to hold direct talks and spoke of the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza in his first Christmas message.

The US pope, who was elected by fellow cardinals in May after the death of his predecessor pope Francis, also condemned the “senselessness” of war and the “rubble and open wounds” it leaves behind.

Speaking to a crowd of some 26,000 people in St Peter’s Square, the pope called for “solidarity with and acceptance of those in need” in Europe -- a possible reference to growing anti-immigration sentiment on the continent.

“Let us pray in a particular way for the tormented people of Ukraine,” he said.

“May the parties involved, with the support and commitment of the international community, find the courage to engage in sincere, direct and respectful dialogue,” he added.

Russian and Ukrainian officials have spoken separately in recent weeks to US negotiators about proposals to end the war started by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Tens of thousands have been killed, eastern Ukraine decimated and millions forced to flee



Pope Leo XIV waves to the faithful at the main balcony of St. Peter’s basilica

their homes.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky this week outlined key points of a plan to end the conflict after US talks.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin has so far shown no willingness to compromise, doubling down on his hardline demands.

‘Return of life’

In his first Christmas homily as pontiff, Leo addressed the dismal conditions in Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of people are still living in temporary shelters in wintry conditions weeks after a fragile ceasefire took hold.

“How... can we not think of the tents in Gaza, exposed for weeks to rain, wind and cold,” the pope said, adding that the territory’s inhabitants “have nothing left and have lost everything.”

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POPE LEO XIV

The UN has said that an estimated 1.3 million people currently need shelter assistance in Gaza and has warned of the increasing risk of hypothermia as temperatures dip.

“The war, in all its forms, has been harsh on everyone living on this land,” Elias al-Jalda, a Palestinian Christian from Gaza, told AFP after attending a Christmas mass at Gaza’s only Roman Catholic Church late on Wednesday.

“We hope this year will mark

the beginning of a new phase -- one defined by a complete end to the war and the return of life to Gaza,” said Jaldá, one of dozens attending the mass.

Joy in Bethlehem

In Bethlehem, the Christian community celebrated its first festive Christmas in more than two years as the occupied West Bank city emerges from the shadow of the war in Gaza.

Hundreds of worshippers gathered for mass on Wednesday night at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the biblical birthplace of Jesus Christ.

Hundreds also took part in the parade down Bethlehem’s narrow Star Street on Wednesday, while a dense crowd massed in the square.

“Today is full of joy because we haven’t been able to celebrate be-

YOU KNOW WHAT

While the Pope spoke of “solidarity,” US President Donald Trump’s holiday message wished a Merry Christmas “to everyone, including the radical left-wing scum,” creating a stark contrast in tone from global leaders

cause of the war,” said Milagros Anstas, 17.

Men dressed as Santa Claus sold toffee apples and toys as families took photographs in front of a nativity scene framed by a giant star.

As darkness fell, multi-coloured lights shone over Manger Square and a towering Christmas tree glittered next to the Church of the Nativity.

Hope in Syria

In Syria, Christmas lights illuminated Damascus’s Old City despite the Christian community’s fears of violence after a deadly attack in June.

Around the district, home to several important churches, red baubles hung from trees, shopkeepers put up Christmas decorations and street vendors peddled warm chestnuts.

“Syria deserves joy and for us to be happy, and to hope for a new future,” said student Loris Aasaf, 20.

North Korea’s Kim visits nuclear subs as Putin hails ‘invincible’ bond

AFP | Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visited a nuclear submarine factory and received a message from Russia’s Vladimir Putin hailing the countries’ “invincible friendship”, Pyongyang’s state media said yesterday.

North Korea and Russia have drawn closer since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine nearly four years ago, and Pyongyang has sent troops to fight for Russia.

In return, Russia is sending North Korea financial aid, military technology and food and energy supplies, analysts say.

The “heroic” efforts of North Korean soldiers in Russia’s Kursk region “clearly proved the invincible friendship” between Moscow and Pyongyang, Putin said in a message to Kim, according to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

Their work demonstrated the nations’ “militant fraternity”, Pu-



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visiting the manufacturing site of an 8,700-tonnage nuclear-powered strategic guided missile submarine

tin said in the message received by Pyongyang last week.

The provisions of the “historic treaty” the two leaders signed last year, which includes a mutual defence clause, had been fulfilled “thanks to our joint efforts”, Putin wrote.

South Korean and Western

intelligence agencies have estimated that the North has sent thousands of soldiers to Russia, primarily to Kursk, along with artillery shells, missiles and long-range rocket systems.

Around 2,000 troops have been killed and thousands more have been wounded, according to

YOU KNOW WHAT

Photos showed Kim’s daughter, Kim Ju Ae, standing beside him during the submarine facility tour, continuing her pattern of appearing at major military events, which analysts see as a sign of her growing political profile

South Korean estimates.

North Korea acknowledged this month that its troops in Kursk had been assigned to clear mines and that some had died on deployment.

KCNA reported Putin’s letter

on the same day that it published details of Kim’s undated recent visit to a manufacturing base for nuclear-powered submarines.

There, the North Korean leader vowed to counter the “threat” of South Korea producing its own such vessels.

US President Donald Trump has given the green light for South Korea to build “nuclear-powered attack submarines”, though key details of the project remain uncertain.

Photos published by KCNA showed Kim walking alongside a purportedly 8,700-tonne submarine at an indoor assembly site, surrounded by officials and his daughter Kim Ju Ae.

In another image, Kim Jong Un smiles during an official briefing as Kim Ju Ae stands beside him.

Pyongyang would view Seoul developing nuclear subs as “an offensive act severely violating its security and maritime sovereignty”, Kim Jong Un said, according to KCNA.



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TWEETS

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In case looking for light reading, two books I particularly enjoyed in 2025: “Heart Lamp” by Banu Mushtaq and “Mother Mary Comes to Me” by Arundhati Roy. Both Booker Prize winning authors.

@GitaGopinath

02



To every @WFP partner and advocate for the world’s hungry, your commitment and support has provided the most vulnerable families with life-saving assistance. You have given them a reason to believe in a better future. Thank you. Wishing a happy, peaceful holiday season to all.

@WFPChief

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As we close the year, we look ahead with a shared responsibility: to promote peace, hope and justice for everyone, everywhere. Happy Holidays.

@AminaJMohammed

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Merry Christmas to everyone in the world who is Christian, and to others who celebrate it — just for the heaven of it. As for the rest of everybody, including Muslims, Atheists, Hindus, Buddhists, Animists, & Jews, Happy Thursday!

@neiltyson

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