

In brief Easter appearance at Vatican, Pope Francis urges Gaza ceasefire



The Pontiff had been increasingly vocal about Israel's military campaign in Gaza before being hospitalised with pneumonia.

The Vatican, April 20 (RHC)-- During a brief appearance before thousands of Catholic pilgrims gathered in St Peter's Square for the Vatican's open-air Easter Sunday mass, Pope Francis called for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The 88-year-old pontiff, still recovering from a near-fatal bout of double pneumonia, appeared on the balcony of St Peter's Basilica on Sunday as an aide read out his "Urbi et Orbi" – Latin for "to the city and the world" – benediction, in which the pope condemned the "deplorable humanitarian situation" caused by Israel's 18-month war on the Palestinian territory.

"I express my closeness to the sufferings ... of all the Israeli people and the Palestinian people," said the message. The pope also called on the Palestinian armed group Hamas to release its remaining captives and condemned what he said was a "worrisome" trend of anti-Semitism in the world. "I appeal to the warring parties: call a ceasefire, release the hostages and come to the aid of a starving people that aspires to a future of peace."

Before his recent five-week stay at Rome's Gemelli Hospital, Francis had been ramping up criticism of Israel's military campaign in Gaza, calling the situation "very serious and shameful" in January.

Pope Francis, who has been under doctors' orders to observe two months of convalescence since he left the hospital on March 23, would have normally presided over the entire event, but on this occasion was replaced by Cardinal Angelo Comastri.

Reporting from the Vatican, Al Jazeera's James Bays said: "This is a man who has been very unwell, 38 days in hospital, double pneumonia, kidney problems, and his doctors at one point thought he wasn't going to make it."

Bays questioned whether Francis was following his doctors' advice, having made "short appearances in recent days," including a visit to a prison in Rome, where he abstained from performing a traditional foot-washing ritual imitating Jesus Christ's washing of his disciples' feet.

Asked by a journalist after his visit what he felt about this Easter week in his current condition, the pope replied: "I am living it as best I can."

Meanwhile, the Vatican also said in a statement that Francis held a private meeting with United States Vice President JD Vance to exchange Easter greetings on Sunday morning.

On Saturday, Vance held talks with the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, and Paul Richard Gallagher, the Holy See's secretary for relations with states.

Vance's visit came just two months after a spat between Francis and the administration of US President Donald Trump over its policies, including plans to deport millions of migrants and refugees and widespread cuts to foreign aid and domestic welfare programmes.

The pope, who called the immigration crackdown a "disgrace," rejected Vance's attempted use of medieval-era Catholic teachings to justify the policy in an unusual open letter to US Catholic bishops.

"JD Vance [was] trying to interpret a certain theology as saying that you should look after those closest to you before you worry about those abroad. The pope then wrote a letter to U.S. bishops and said: 'No, you need to think about everyone,'" said Bays.

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