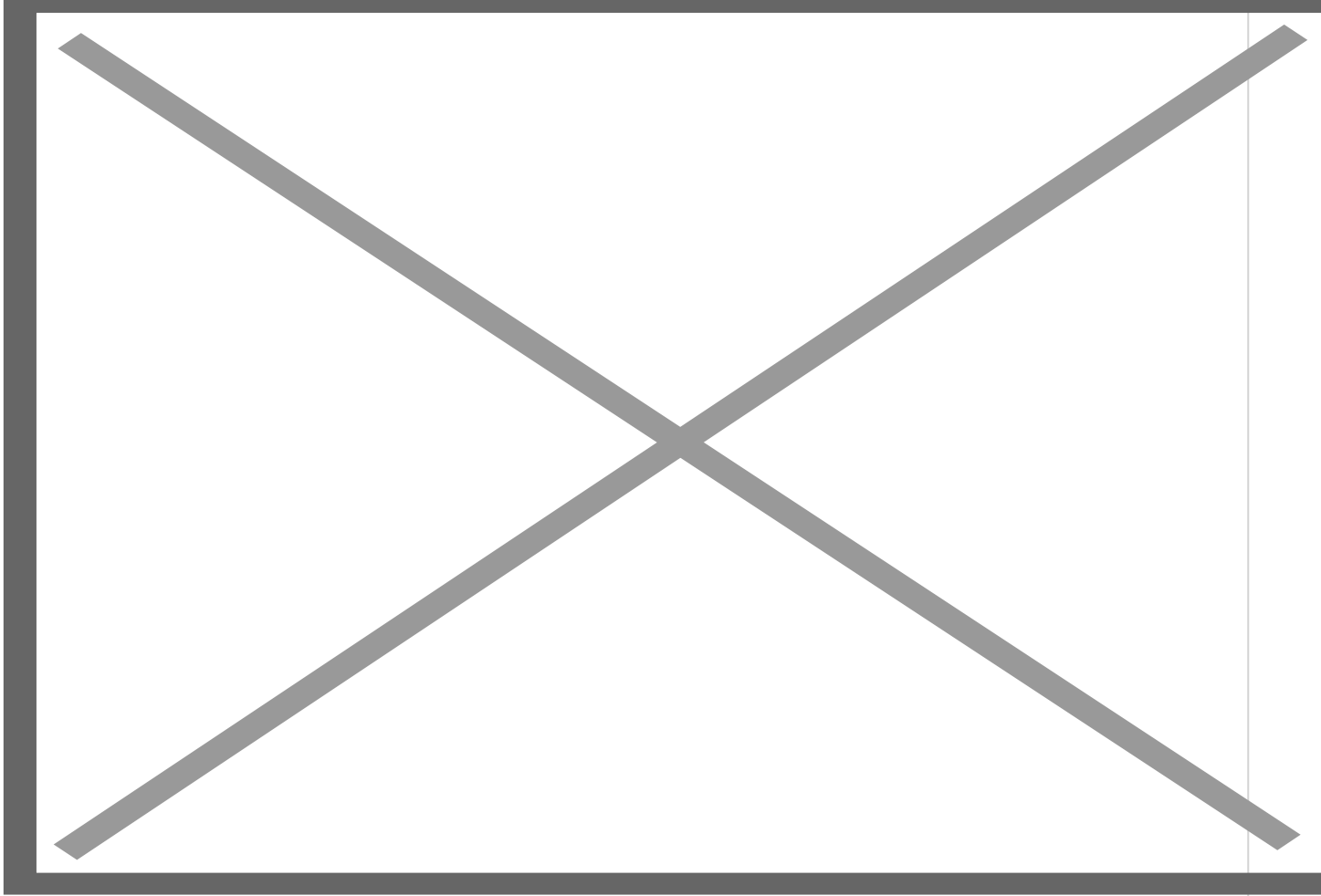


# *Pope Francis makes urgent call for peace in the land of Christ's birth*

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An installation by Rana Bishara shows a figure of baby Jesus, made by Sana Fara Bishara, inside an incubator in front of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem [Clodagh Kilcoyne/Reuters]

The Vatican, December 25 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has kicked off global Christmas celebrations with a lament – that Jesus's message of peace is being drowned out by the "futile logic of war" in the very land he was born. Israel's deadliest-ever war on Gaza cast a shadow as the pontiff presided over the evening Mass on Sunday, attended by 6,500 people at St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

"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," said the Catholic leader.

The 87-year-old pontiff said the real message of Christmas is peace and love, urging people not to be obsessed with worldly success and the "idolatry of consumerism." He spoke of "the all-too-human thread that runs through history: the quest for worldly power and might, fame and glory, which measures everything in terms of success, results, numbers and figures, a world obsessed with achievement."

"Tonight, love changes history," he said, draped in white robes.

Bethlehem, the Biblical city in the occupied West Bank where Christians believe Jesus Christ was born in a manger more than 2,000 years ago, effectively cancelled the annual Christmas celebrations that normally draw thousands of tourists.

The town did away with its giant Christmas tree, marching bands and flamboyant nativity scene this year, settling for just a few festive lights. In the center of town, a huge Palestinian flag has been unfolded with a banner declaring, "The bells of Bethlehem ring for a ceasefire in Gaza."

"A lot of people are dying for this land," said Nicole Najjar, an 18-year-old student. "It's really hard to celebrate while our people are dying."

Francis spoke hours after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged to fight deeper into the Palestinian enclave of Gaza after his troops endured one of the worst days of losses of their ground war.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said an Israeli attack late on Sunday killed at least 70 people in the Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza and destroyed several houses.

A total of at least 20,424 people, most of them women and children, have been killed in the enclave since the war began, according to the territory's Health Ministry.

"Bethlehem is celebrating Christmas with sadness and sorrow because of what's happening in Gaza and in all the West Bank, all Palestinian territories," said Palestinian Minister of Tourism Rula Maayah. The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, arrived on Sunday at the Church of the Nativity, clad in a 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. "We are here to pray and to ask not only for a ceasefire, a ceasefire is not enough... violence generates only violence."

Francis has made numerous appeals for a ceasefire in the conflict raging in Gaza and has called for the release of all captives. When the Christmas Eve Mass ended, the pope, pushed in a wheelchair, moved down the basilica with the life-sized statue of baby Jesus on his lap and flanked by children carrying bouquets. The statue was placed in a manger in a nativity scene in the Basilica.

At noon (11:00 GMT) on Monday, Francis will deliver his Christmas Day "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) message and blessing.



**Radio Habana Cuba**