

# Bethlehem marks sombre Christmas under shadow of war

AFP – Hundreds of people gathered at the Church of the Nativity in the holy city of Bethlehem on Tuesday to mark another solemn Christmas overshadowed by the war in Gaza.

Missing for a second consecutive year were the festive decorations, and the crowd paled in comparison to the throngs of tourists and pilgrims of Christmases past – a reflection of the sombre mood as the war between Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip drags on.

At Manger Square, the heart of the Palestinian city dominated by the revered church that marks the site where Christians believe Jesus Christ was born, a group of scouts held a small parade that broke the morning's silence.

“Our children want to play and laugh,” read a sign carried by one of them, as his friends whistled and cheered.

The fighting in Gaza – which is separated from the occupied West Bank by a swath of Israeli territory – erupted after Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7 last year.

The attack, the deadliest in Israel's history, resulted in the deaths of 1,208 people, according to an AFP tally of official Israeli figures.

Israel's retaliatory war in Gaza has left 45,338 people dead, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory, figures the UN considers reliable.

Traditionally in Bethlehem, a grand Christmas tree would light up Manger Square, but local authorities opted against elaborate celebrations for a second year.

“This year we limited our joy,” Bethlehem mayor Anton Salman

told AFP.

Prayers, including the church's famed midnight mass, will still be held in the presence of the Catholic Church's Latin Patriarch, but the festivities will be of a more strictly religious nature than the festive celebrations the city once held.

Despite the gloomy mood, some Christians in the Holy Land – who number about 185,000 in Israel and 47,000 in the Palestinian territories – are finding refuge in prayer.

“Christmas is a feast of faith... We're going to pray and ask God to end our suffering,” Salman said.

In a message to Christians all over the world, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked them for supporting Israel's fight against the “forces of evil”.

“You've stood by our side resiliently, consistently, forcefully as Israel defends our civilisation against barbarism,” he said.

– Christians in Syria –

Elsewhere in the Middle East, hundreds of people took to the streets in Christian areas of Syria's capital to protest the burning of a Christmas tree.

The incident took place in the Christian-majority town of Suqaylabiyah in central Syria just over two weeks after Islamist-led rebels spearheaded an offensive that ousted president Bashar al-Assad.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, the fighters who set fire to the tree were foreigners.

A demonstrator in Damascus who gave his name as Georges told AFP he was protesting “injustice against Christians”.

“If we’re not allowed to live our Christian faith in our country, as we used to, then we don’t belong here anymore,” he said.

A religious leader from Syria’s victorious Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) addressed residents, maintaining that those who torched the tree were “not Syrian” and promising they would be punished.

Syria’s new rulers have vowed to protect the country’s religious minorities, including Christians.

But some Syrian Christians, including secular longtime opponents to Assad’s rule, fear the new leadership’s Sunni Islamist ideology will mean their community’s political aspirations and those of other minorities will not be taken into account in the transition.

– Jubilee 2025 –

In Germany, Christmas was overshadowed by a deadly attack at a market, prompting President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to issue a message of healing.

A Saudi doctor, Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, 50, was arrested Friday at the scene of the attack, in which a rented SUV ploughed at high speed through a crowd of revellers, bringing chaos to the festive event.

“A dark shadow hangs over this Christmas,” said the head of state. “Hatred and violence must not have the final word. Let’s not allow ourselves to be driven apart. Let’s stand together.”

Pope Francis will mark Christmas Eve on Tuesday with a special ceremony launching Jubilee 2025, a year of Catholic celebrations set to draw more than 30 million pilgrims to Rome.

The motto of the Jubilee is “Pilgrims of Hope”, and the

Argentine pontiff is expected to repeat his calls for peace in a world riven by conflict, particularly in the Middle East.

He drew an angry response from Israel at the weekend for condemning the "cruelty" of Israel's strikes in Gaza that killed children.

Organised by the Church every 25 years, the Jubilee is intended as a period of reflection and penance.

Among the groups registered on the official site is Italian LGBTQ group La Tenda di Gionata, reflecting the pope's call for the Church to be open to all.

AFP