

Amid uncertainty, patriarchs urge Mideast faithful to keep hope

Amid Lebanon's political and economic strife and uncertainty in the Middle East, Catholic patriarchs urged their faithful to forge ahead in hope at Christmastime.

At least two patriarchs expressed concern about Lebanon's failure to form a new government since parliamentary elections in May.

In his Christmas message, Lebanese Cardinal Bechara Rai, patriarch of Maronite Catholics, denounced the stalling and procrastination as a "crime."

Politicians "do not care about the enormous financial losses suffered by the state and the Lebanese people," he said in his message from Bkerke, the Maronite Patriarchate north of Beirut.

Their "negative political practices" have created a "suffocating economic and social crisis for households," Cardinal Rai said, noting that one-third of the Lebanese are living below the poverty line. He said the 30 percent unemployment rate encourages migration from the Lebanese homeland.

"This is what provoked the wrath of the people," the patriarch stressed, referring to the demonstrations that took place Dec. 23 in Beirut and other parts of the country.

"Due to the rampant corruption in ministries and public administrations, the paralysis of economic activity, the increase in deficits and debt, the state coffers are at a dangerous level," warned the patriarch.

He added that due to "the lack of seriousness and agreement to develop a conscious plan for the return of displaced persons and refugees to their countries, the economic, social and security burden on Lebanon and its people is increasingly heavy."

Lebanon continues to host more than one million Syrian refugees, as well as Iraqis and Palestinians.

"We are all invited to glorify God, our Creator, our Saviour and our Lord, by making peace in our land, in the family, the community, the church, the state," and through spreading hope from the heart, Cardinal Rai concluded.

In his Christmas message from Beirut, Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan was equally urgent in his tone regarding issues surrounding Lebanon's governmental paralysis.

"Instead of a joyous atmosphere, Christmas this year comes rather in a very sad

state of mind," he said.

"We raise our voices and call on all politicians to bear the responsibility of their indolence in obstructing the formation of the government," Patriarch Younan said. "The consequences of such stagnation are alarming and very dangerous on the entire nation and particularly on the common people."

In reference to neighboring Syria enduring for more than seven years "the horrendous conflict of destruction and killing, we pray (to) the merciful divine child of Bethlehem to ensure reconciliation and peace among the people of that beleaguered and devastated nation," Patriarch Younan said.

"We are very pleased to know that most of the Syrian cities and provinces have been liberated," he wrote, noting that many public and private institutions are now working. "We exhort all those who have been forced to leave to make a quick return to their beloved Syria, in order to share in rebuilding their homeland, preserving their ancient civilization, and enhancing their participation in finding the best civil solutions for their future," he said.

As for Iraq, Patriarch Younan noted that two years have passed "since the defeat of terrorist bands" with the liberation of Mosul and the Ninevah Plain, a region historically inhabited by Christians, mostly Syriacs.

"Most of our Christian communities once uprooted, are, thanks to God, returned," he noted.

"We hope that people who endured unheard-of suffering will be able to make a safe return to their homes, where they would live in peace and participate in the reconstruction of their country," Patriarch Younan said.

For those still enduring exile, the patriarch asked for God's mercy, consolation and strength.

On Christmas Eve, Patriarch Younan celebrated Mass at St. Elias Church in Beirut for displaced Iraqis, most of whom are hoping to migrate to the West.

In his Christmas message from Damascus, Syria, Melkite Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi urged the faithful to be thankful, to help the oppressed and the poor, to welcome the outcasts and the marginalized, to liberate the exploited. Working for peace, he said, begins first "from our family, to our community" and reaches "to the whole world."