

Finding Gaza strip solution is no easy task, says president of Canadian bishops' conference

Finding solutions to the situation in Gaza is a complicated task, says the president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"We need to try to educate people as to the situation here," said Archbishop Richard Gagnon of Winnipeg. "It is a very complex issue."

Gagnon was one of 15 bishops – mostly from Europe and North America – taking part in an annual weeklong visit by bishops to support the Holy Land's local Christian communities.

Archbishop Gagnon said Gaza's problems are complex for many reasons, including "the approach and thinking by the current (Hamas) government."

"And there is a confrontational situation where there is tension between the Gaza territory and the government of Israel, and this also needs to be brought within context. It is very complicated."

Since 2001, thousands of missiles have been launched from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel border towns, sometimes resulting in Israeli retaliatory attacks that have caused overwhelming destruction in Gaza.

Still, despite the many political issues and economic difficulties people face in their daily lives, Gagnon said he was struck by the real sense of joy and positivity he sensed within Gaza's Catholic community.

"They have a real sense of who they are and what their identity is," said Gagnon. "They provide wonderful opportunities for people in Gaza, both Christians and non-Christians, through their schools and charitable organizations."

Yet there is a sense of isolation and young people in the Gaza Strip are experiencing an unemployment rate of 70 per cent. Most see emigration as their only solution, said Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese of the Military Services.

"This is a challenge for young people," he said. "They are facing uncertainty and insecurity about their future." The future of young people is "very tenuous."

"Basically, the only solution they see is getting out. But that is very problematic, because once they do get out, there is no coming back (because of

travel restrictions). Leaving means an indefinite separation for families.”

Basics such as water and electricity are interrupted daily, he said.

The Gaza Strip has been under an air, land and sea blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt in 2007, when Hamas took control of the Palestinian area from the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority.

The 1.8 million Palestinian residents of the coastal Gaza Strip are cut off from the remainder of the Palestinian territory by the blockade, which also restricts their free travel access to the rest of the world.

Canada, the United States, the European Union, Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, Israel and other countries list Hamas as a terrorist organization, charging that it is funded by Iran.