

## Israel regrets Gaza Church strike, vows full investigation



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GAZA CITY, July 18— Israel has expressed deep regret over a deadly strike on Gaza’s Holy Family Church, the enclave’s only Catholic church, and pledged a full investigation into the incident, which left three people dead and several others injured.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem confirmed the church was struck Thursday morning during Israeli military operations. The church has served as a shelter for Gaza’s dwindling Christian

community throughout the ongoing conflict.

“Israel deeply regrets that a stray shell hit the Holy Family Church,” said the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “Every innocent life lost is a tragedy. The cause of the incident is under review.”

The Israel Defense Forces acknowledged that shell fragments from a tank mistakenly hit the church during nearby operations. The IDF emphasized its ongoing efforts to avoid civilian casualties and to protect religious sites.

Pope Leo received a call from Netanyahu following the strike. According to the Vatican, the Pope reiterated his urgent call for a ceasefire and highlighted the severe humanitarian toll in Gaza, particularly on children, the elderly, and the sick.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa and Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III made a rare visit to Gaza to express solidarity with the Christian community. The Latin Patriarchate named the deceased as Saad Issa Kostandi Salameh, Foumia Issa Latif Ayyad, and Najwa Abu Dawood.

The attack follows a December 2023 incident at the same church, where two women were fatally shot.

Meanwhile, ceasefire negotiations are ongoing, with indications that Israel may ease its stance on the strategic Morag Corridor in southern Gaza. Talks, mediated by international partners, aim to

secure the first halt in hostilities in months.

The Holy Family Church remains a powerful symbol of resilience amid war.