

Pope arrives in Morocco for two-day trip

Sat, 2019-03-30 16:04

RABAT: Pope Francis arrived in Morocco on Saturday for a visit which will see him meet Muslim leaders and migrants ahead of a mass with the country's minority Catholic community.

The spiritual leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics was invited by King Mohammed VI as part of a mission on the "development of interreligious dialogue", according to Moroccan authorities.

Improving relations with other religions has been a priority for the Argentine pontiff, whose papacy has been marred by a wave of child sex abuse allegations against clergy.

The pope's plane landed in the capital Rabat shortly before 2 pm (1300 GMT) and he was greeted by the king who is known as the "commander of the faithful" in Morocco, where 99 percent of the population is Muslim. The Moroccan capital has stepped up security ahead of the first papal visit to the North African country since John Paul II in 1985.



Pope Francis, on the popemobile, and Moroccan King Mohammed VI, right, waving, make their way through the crowd in Rabat, Morocco, Saturday, March 30, 2019. (AP)

Buildings have been repainted, streets decorated and lawns manicured for the pope's two-day visit.

Francis was to be presented on arrival with dates and almond milk, before stepping into the popemobile and the monarch into a limousine. They were to drive to a welcome ceremony at the Tour (or tower) Hassan mosque and a mausoleum, attended by 25,000 and beamed onto giant screens, before the king hosts Francis at the royal palace. Wellwishers began packing the esplanade outside the 12th century incomplete mosque from midday as rain drizzled on them while others, including many Moroccans in traditional costume, lined the roads nearby. Red carpets covered the ground at the entrance to the esplanade and two armchairs, red as well, were placed on a platform in front of the mosque.

Dear Moroccan friends, I am coming as a pilgrim of peace and fraternity. We Christians and Muslims believe in God, the Creator and the Merciful, who created people to live like brothers and sisters, respecting each other in their diversity, and helping one another in their needs.

– Pope Francis (@Pontifex) [March 29, 2019](#)

Pope Francis and Morocco's King Mohammed VI on Saturday declared Jerusalem the "common patrimony of humanity and especially the followers of the three monotheistic religions," during the pontiff's visit to Rabat.

"The specific multi-religious character, the spiritual dimension and the particular cultural identity of Jerusalem... must be protected and promoted," they said in a joint statement released by the Vatican.

Francis will also visit an institute where around 1,300 students are studying to become imams and preachers, teaching "moderate Islam" and backed by the king.

"It's a very significant event, the first time that a pope is welcomed to an institute for the training of imams," said Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti.

During the visit, Francis is due to hear from two students – one African and one European -as well as a statement by Morocco's Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

A concert drawing inspiration from Islam, Christianity and Judaism is also on the agenda.

Last month Francis visited the United Arab Emirates, where he met with Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's prestigious seat of learning.

The two signed a document on "human fraternity for world peace", which among other things called for "freedom of belief" and "full citizenship" rights for minorities.

Francis will not hesitate to refer to the text, which from now on he will give to all heads of state, Gisotti said.

In Morocco, where Islam is the state religion, authorities are keen to stress the country's "religious tolerance" which allows Christians and Jews to worship freely.

But Moroccans are automatically considered Muslim if they are not born into the Jewish community, apostasy is socially frowned upon, and proselytising is criminalised.

Those who try to “rock the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion” risk a prison term of up to three years.



The honor guard waits for Pope Francis to arrive in Rabat, Morocco, Saturday, March 30, 2019. (AP)

After years in the shadows, since 2017 the small number of converts have called openly for the right to live “without persecution” and “without discrimination”.

Around 30,000 to 35,000 Catholics live in Morocco, many of them from sub-Saharan Africa.

The pope is due to finish his Saturday schedule by meeting migrants at a centre run by Catholic humanitarian organisation Caritas.

The charity runs day centres for migrants who are trying to reach Europe across the Mediterranean, as well as supporting their access to services.

The number of people taking the sea route from Morocco to Spain has increased recently due to the closure of the border with Libya.

In 2017, Caritas centres in Rabat, Casablanca and Tangier welcomed 7,551 new arrivals, according to the charity.

Rabat claims to have a “humanistic” approach to migration and rejects allegations by rights groups of “brutal arrest campaigns” and “forced displacement” to the country’s southern border.

Francis has throughout his papacy highlighted the plight of migrants and refugees, calling on Catholics as well as politicians to show solidarity with

those in need.

On Sunday, the pope will celebrate mass at a Rabat stadium with an estimated 10,000 people attending.









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Pope to broaden Muslim dialogue with Morocco visit
Morocco Christians urge religious freedom before pope visit

Foreign ministers prepare draft resolutions ahead of Arab Summit

Sat, 2019-03-30 15:59

TUNIS: Arab foreign ministers prepared a number of draft resolutions on Friday ahead of the 30th Arab League Summit in the Tunisian capital.

The preparatory meeting covered several issues tabled for discussion at the summit, and adopted a number of draft resolutions that will be submitted to Arab leaders on Sunday.

The draft resolutions deal with the Palestinian cause, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, and developments in Syria, Yemen and Libya.

The meeting condemned Iranian interference in Arab states' internal affairs as a violation of international law, the principle of good neighborliness and the sovereignty of states.

The meeting demanded that Tehran cease provocative acts that undermine confidence-building, threaten regional security and stability, and fuel sectarian conflicts.

A draft resolution strongly condemns the continued firing of Iranian-made ballistic missiles by the Houthi militia in Yemen at Saudi Arabia, including Makkah, Islam's holiest city. The Tehran-backed Houthis have launched 200 missiles at the Kingdom.

The draft resolution also denounces Iran's continued interference in Bahrain's internal affairs by supporting terrorism, training terrorists, smuggling arms and explosives, and inciting sectarian strife.

The draft resolution stresses the need for Tehran to stop supporting groups that fuel sectarian conflicts, especially in the Arab Gulf states, and to stop financing militias and armed groups in Arab countries.

The foreign ministers also prepared a draft resolution on Iran's occupation of the three Emirati islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. The draft resolution affirms the UAE's absolute sovereignty over its three islands.



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Syria's return to Arab League not on summit agenda: spokesman King Salman and Tunisian President hold bilateral talks

[Pro-Kurdish party members detained before Turkey's elections](#)

Author:

AP

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Sat, 2019-03-30 12:03

ISTANBUL: A pro-Kurdish party in Turkey says party members have been detained in the lead-up to Sunday's municipal elections.

The Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP, said in a statement Saturday that 53 people were detained in Istanbul overnight. They include candidates running for municipal council seats. It said the detentions were an attack on the party that would mar the legitimacy of the elections.

Turkey's private Demiroren news agency said anti-terror police conducted simultaneous raids in multiple Istanbul districts.

The government accuses the HDP of links to outlawed Kurdish militants, and 10 lawmakers, 40 mayors and thousands of activists remain jailed. On Saturday,

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeated the accusation and called the party “terror lovers.”

The HDP says it’s running in the elections through legal, democratic means to regain seats in the predominantly Kurdish southeast.



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Kurds to rally in Turkey ahead of key local electionsDespite talk of returns, Turkey quietly works to integrate Syrian refugees

[Gazans brace for more mass border demos at anniversary](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Fri, 2019-03-29 19:28

GAZA CITY: Protests are to take place across Gaza City on the anniversary of last year's series of demonstrations against Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip.

The protests began on March 30, last year, when Palestinians voiced their frustration at the siege imposed on their region 13 years ago, and at the refusal of Israeli authorities to allow refugees to return to the towns and villages displaced during the 1948 Nakba.

A member of the political bureau of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Talal Abu Zarifa, said the previous demonstrations had gained international attention through "peaceful popular resistance," and had helped rehabilitate the Palestinian cause on the international scene.

He added that regular marches and protests would not stop until the siege was lifted.

Hamas spokesman Hazim Qasim agreed with Zarifa, stating that the protests had achieved "national cohesion," but acknowledged that the liberation of Gaza was still some way off.

He added, though, that continued participation in the marches would send a strong message to Israel and the international community that the Palestinians would not give up on their cause.

Writer and political analyst Hossam Al-Dajni said that the most important achievement of the protests was that they had "eroded" Israel's image as a sympathetic, restrained force, revealing an "uglier" face to the world.

HIGHLIGHTS

- A Palestinian official said the previous demonstrations had gained international attention through 'peaceful popular resistance,' and had helped rehabilitate the Palestinian cause on the international scene.
- Writer and political analyst Hossam Al-Dajni said that the most important achievement of the protests was that they had 'eroded' Israel's image as a sympathetic, restrained force, revealing an 'uglier' face to the world.
- The UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on March 22, condemning Israel and the Israeli Defense Force for war crimes against the demonstrators.

"For years, Israel has been working to connect the Palestinian struggle with terrorism, but during the peaceful marches in Gaza, in which the Palestinians resisted, it committed war crimes in front of the eyes of the world," he told Arab News.

Meanwhile, protestor Ahmed Al-Burdini, who was disabled after being shot in the leg by an Israeli bullet, said he had not missed a protest in months despite his injury.

“I lost my job because of my disability, and there is now no source of income for our family,” he said, claiming he’d been drawn to demonstrate due to the poor living conditions imposed on Gaza by the blockade.

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UN urges Israel, Hamas to avoid violence on Gaza anniversary
Netanyahu says prepared for 'comprehensive' Gaza operation

[Migrants see no end to misery as pope visits Morocco](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-03-29 20:50

CASABLANCA: Migrants at a squalid camp in the Moroccan city of Casablanca have few hopes for the future, after their dreams of a new life in Europe were squashed.

Illegal but tolerated, the Oulad Ziane camp is the last of its kind in the country following the dismantling of similar ones in southern Agadir in March as well as one in the central city of Fes.

"This is no life," lamented Marcelin, a Cameroonian who has been in Morocco for five years and is now stranded in the camp after several failed attempts to leave for European shores.

"We don't expect anything from anyone, but we hope at least for a little security and hygiene for children," said the man in his 30s.

He was speaking ahead of a visit to Morocco this weekend by Pope Francis who will make immigration one of the themes of his landmark trip.

In a message sent Thursday, the pope said he would meet with "migrants ... who represent an appeal to build together a more just and fraternal world."

Home to migrants from across sub-Saharan Africa, the Oulad Ziane camp is a scene of misery and despair.

The number of migrants at the camp varies, but can exceed 2,000, said Lassine Camara, who calls himself the "president" of the Malian community and a spokesman for Cameroonians, Guineans, Ivorians, Nigerians, Senegalese and others there.

They take cover under makeshift shelters of wooden pillars topped with blankets or sheets of plastic.

A water hose has been installed by non-governmental organizations to provide water to drink and for washing, while the groups also ensure rubbish is cleared away, according to a volunteer who did not wish to be named.

Bus stations have become easy gathering points for migrants who can at least use the toilets, said Alpha Camara, a Guinean who leads a Rabat-based association and who also represents those from sub-Saharan Africa.

"There are very few structures for migrants: We are scrambling to give them a semblance of dignity," said an activist in Casablanca.

Five migrants died in 2018 at camps in the northeastern region of Nador due to "disease and poor hygiene," according to the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH).

The authorities are working to clear illegal camps without developing reception facilities, according to several sources.

"The Moroccan policy is to put the migrants on buses and deport them from the north," the Casablanca volunteer said, adding some migrants have endured this five or six times.

The Interior Ministry's immigration director, Khalid Zerouali, however denies they are being deported, a term used by human rights defenders who denounce "massive arrests" in recent months in the north.

Faced with higher migration flows since the closure of the road via Libya, the authorities last year stopped 89,000 attempts at "irregular immigration," including 29,000 at sea, according to official figures.

Non-Moroccans arrested at illegal camps are sent home, including 5,500 who returned voluntarily in 2018, or moved to other cities, according to Zerouali.

Since the start of the year, about 9,000 sub-Saharan migrants have been “removed” from along the Mediterranean coast under a law that bars those without residency from certain areas in order to stop trafficking, he said.

Ahead of his visit, the pope said he was coming “as a pilgrim of peace and of fraternity, in a world which has great need of both.”

“If the pope comes to speak about migration, then I hope the world can see the misery in which we live,” sighed one Senegalese man at the camp who hid his face for fear of being arrested and deported.

Near him, a man cooked up a pot of rice to be sold in portions as youths played table football beside a pile of garbage.

“We sleep where we urinate,” said one angry young Burkinabe man.

The camp suffers from a “lack of hygiene, violence and makeshift structures,” said a representative of a local association.

Last year it also witnessed four fires as well as clashes which erupted between migrants and residents, according to the volunteer from Casablanca.

Despite this, the Cameroonian Marcelin still thinks integration is possible for the migrants and that it is easier for Muslims.

Morocco says it has a “humanist” migrant policy and has conducted two campaigns since 2014 giving residency to 50,000 illegal aliens.



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Maltese navy takes control of tanker hijacked by migrants: statement
At least 30 migrants believed missing after boat sinking off Libya