

Pope Francis embarks on risky, historic Iraq tour

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Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi walks with Pope Francis upon his arrival at Baghdad International Airport, in Baghdad, Iraq March 5, 2021. Vatican Media/Â-Handout via REUTERS

Baghdad: Pope Francis embarked on Friday on the first ever papal visit to Iraq, his riskiest trip since his election in 2013, saying he felt duty-bound to make the "emblematic" visit because the country had suffered so much for so long.

His first stop after his plane touched down at Baghdad International Airport was to meet Iraqi President Barham Salih at the presidential palace, where a red carpet, military band and flock of doves greeted the pontiff.

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A motorcade of dozens of vehicles accompanied Francis out of the airport compound, which has recently come under rocket fire from militia groups.

"I am happy to be making trips again," he said in brief comments to reporters aboard his plane. The coronavirus pandemic has prevented Francis from travelling and the Iraq trip is his first outside Italy since November 2019.

"This is an emblematic trip and it is a duty towards a land that has been martyred for so many years," Francis said, before donning a mask and greeting each reporter individually, without shaking hands.

Francis, who normally insists on using simple and small cars on his trips, was driven to the palace in a bullet-proof BMW sedan, security officials said.

As he and the president walked together, Francis limped noticeably, indicating that his sciatica may have flared up again. The condition forced him to cancel several events earlier this year.

Francis's whirlwind tour will take him by plane, helicopter and possibly armoured car to four cities, including areas that most foreign dignitaries are unable to reach, let alone in such a short space of time.

He will say Mass at a Baghdad church, meet Iraq's top Shiite Muslim cleric in the southern city of Najaf and travel north to Mosul, where the army had to empty the streets for security reasons last year for a visit by Iraq's prime minister.

Mosul is a former stronghold of Islamic State, and churches and other buildings there still bear the scars of conflict.

VIOLENCE AND HOPE

Since the defeat of the Islamic State militants in 2017, Iraq has seen a greater degree of security, though violence persists, often in the form of rocket attacks by Iran-aligned militias on U.S. targets, and U.S. military action in response.

On Wednesday 10 rockets landed on an airbase that hosts U.S., coalition and Iraqi forces. Hours later, Francis reaffirmed he would travel to Iraq.

Islamic State also remains a threat. In January, a suicide attack claimed by the Sunni militant group killed 32 people in Baghdad's deadliest such attack for years.

Francis will meet clergy at a Baghdad church where Islamist gunmen killed more than 50 worshippers in 2010. Violence against Iraq's minority religious groups, especially when a third of the country was being run by Islamic State, has reduced its ancient Christian community to a fifth of its once 1.5 million people.

The pontiff will also visit Ur, birthplace of the prophet Abraham, who is revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews, and meet Iraq's revered top Shiite Muslim cleric, 90-year-old Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

The meeting with Sistani, who wields great influence over Iraq's Shi'ite majority and in the country's politics, will be the first by a pope.

Some Shi'ite militant groups have opposed the pope's visit, framing it as Western interference in Iraq's affairs, but many Iraqis hope that it can help foster a fresh view of Iraq.

"It might not change much on the ground, but at least if the pope visits, people will see our country in a different light, not just bombs and war," said Ali Hassan, a 30-year-old Baghdad resident picking up relatives at the airport.

- Reuters, UNIAN