

Pope appeals to US and Iran to pursue dialogue, self-restraint

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Vatican City: Pope Francis on Thursday urged the United States and Iran to avoid escalation and pursue "dialogue and self-restraint" to avert wider conflict in the Middle East.

The pope made his appeal, his first direct comment on the current crisis, in a yearly speech that has come to be known as his "State of the World" address to ambassadors accredited to the Vatican.

"Particularly troubling are the signals coming from the entire region following the heightening of tensions between Iran and the United States," Francis told the diplomats from more than 180 states.

He said the tensions risked "compromising the gradual process of rebuilding in Iraq, as well as setting the groundwork for a vaster conflict that all of us would want to avert".

"I, therefore, renew my appeal that all the interested parties avoid an escalation of the conflict and keep alive the flame of dialogue and self-restraint, in full respect of international law," he said.

The US President Donald Trump has suggested Iran was "standing down" after it fired missiles at US forces in Iraq on Wednesday, itself an act of retaliation for the Jan. 3 US strike that killed Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani.

- Reuters