News




People walk as traffic is blocked by security forces Dec. 31 in Kinshasa, Congo. Church leaders in Congo have expressed "profound shock" after security forces fired on Catholics protesting rule by President Joseph Kabila, leaving at least eight dead. (CNS/Kenny Katombe, Reuters)

by Catholic News Service

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Kinshasa, Congo — January 2, 2018

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## Armed only with Bibles and rosaries

On Jan. 3, National Public Radio reported that Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of Kinshasa called the attack on the church "nothing short of barbaric." He said people at Mass, armed only with Bibles and rosaries, were attacked with tear gas.

“We condemn the actions of supposedly valiant men in uniform,” NPR reporter Ofeibea Quist-Arcton quoted Pasinya as saying.

“It’s time for mediocre people to leave office and for truth to replace systematic lies in Congo,” he said.

“How can the Congolese have any confidence in leaders incapable of protecting the people or guaranteeing peace and justice?” the cardinal asked.

He called for an independent commission to investigate the attack.

Church leaders in Congo expressed shock after security forces fired on Catholic protesters, leaving at least eight dead and 120 people detained.

The Dec. 31 protest against rule by President Joseph Kabila was organized by the Kinshasa archdiocesan lay coordination committee. At least a dozen priests were among those detained.

"We condemn with utmost vigor this unjustified violence," the Congolese bishops' conference said in a statement Jan. 2.

"We similarly denounce this attack on freedom of worship, which is guaranteed in every democratic state, as well as the profanation of churches and physical aggression against the faithful and their priests."

The statement said the bishops were "profoundly shocked by such ignoble acts," and would demand a "serious and objective inquiry" into who was responsible.

Police used tear gas and batons against Massgoers in some of the capital's 150 parishes and violently broke up attempted marches in which protesters demanded fresh elections in the country.

A United Nations spokeswoman said seven deaths had been recorded in Kinshasa, and another at Kananga.

The violence was condemned by U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who urged Kabila's government to show restraint and "respect the rights of Congolese people to free expression."

The Catholic Church makes up around half the 67.5 million inhabitants of Congo, and the bishops have pressed Kabila to step down since his second and final term expired in December 2016.

Later, a church-brokered accord allowed the president to stay in office, alongside an opposition head of government, pending elections by the end of 2017. However, in November, Congo's Electoral Commission said the ballot would be postponed until Dec. 23, 2018.

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In a November statement, the bishops' conference said church observers had recorded 56 deaths and 355 arrests in half a year of opposition protests. They urged Kabila to release political detainees and stick to the Dec. 31, 2016, accord.

The rector of Kinshasa's St. Alphonse Parish, Msgr. Hugues Ndongisila, told Radio France Internationale that police had beaten and robbed Catholics when they sought refuge in his church, also shooting out its stained-glass windows. He said the bodies of two dead protesters had later been collected by the Red Cross.