News



Cameroonian refugees and Nigerians wait for consultations outside a health post April 13 in the Nigerian village of Ekang. Caritas Internationalis reported the conflict in Cameroon has forced 160,000 people out of their homes into the bush and a further 26,000 to cross into Nigeria. (CNS/Courtesy of Caritas Internationalis)



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When church-brokered peace talks in Cameroon were postponed in August, it testified to the worsening plight of the West African country, where English-speaking separatists have been fighting French-speaking government forces.

In a statement, the talks' chief sponsor, Cardinal Christian Tumi of Douala, pledged he and his Muslim and Protestant partners would go on seeking a solution as "politically neutral servants of God."

But while people of all political leanings had backed the peace initiative, Tumi added, "voices of skepticism, doubt and hostility" had also shown more time was needed.

Even if the talks at Buea go ahead in November, those in charge will face a hard task. Cameroon's president, Paul Biya, now 85, is seeking re-election this October for a seventh consecutive term on a hardline, anti-separatist ticket.

In a single week of late July, two Catholic priests were killed in what local media said were acts of retaliation against the church's stand on human rights abuses, while in May shots were fired at the residence of Archbishop Samuel Kleda, the bishops' conference president.

With similar resistance now facing church mediation attempts in other neighboring countries, it's unclear whether well-intended gestures like Tumi's can expect success.

"The Catholic Church is respected enough here for its initiatives to have some impact, especially when they involve other faiths too," Francis Ajumane, an expert on staff of the Journal du Cameroun daily, explained to NCR. "But not everyone has welcomed this attempt to resolve our crisis, and some members of the ruling party are doing everything to prevent it."

Army units have been deployed since 2016 in Cameroon's English-speaking southwest and northwest regions, where separatists declared an independent state, "Ambazonia," last October on the anniversary of their brief independence from Britain in 1961.



Cameroon President Paul Biya is seen in Beijing March 22. (CNS /Lintao Zhang, pool via EPA)

English-speaking officials, whose territory accounts for a fifth of Cameroon's population of 25 million, had long protested against the imposition of French in local courts, schools and administrative centers, and demanded a return to the federal system which operated until 1972.

Separatist groups have agreed to mediation, but Biya's government has rejected this, opting instead for a show of force.

This has alarmed the Catholic Church, whose five archdioceses — four French and one mostly English-speaking — claim the spiritual loyalty of a third of Cameroon's inhabitants, with Protestants and Muslims each making up around a quarter.

In the past, church leaders have opposed any talk of partition. But in a television interview last April, Kleda conceded that mass poverty and unemployment were fueling discontent, and urged measures of decentralization, such as the election of regional presidents to allow people "to think about their future."

"Peace through armed force is never a true peace," the 59-year-old archbishop added. "Since we're all in the same country and all brothers, our message is to stop the violence immediately at all costs, without vengeance, and to accept others who don't think like us."

In May, as accusations of human rights abuses and summary executions mounted against government troops, Kleda and his fellow bishops sent out a "Cry of Distress" for Pentecost, quoting Exodus 3:7 — "I have seen the afflictions of my people."

"The northwest and southwest regions have been passing through difficult times, marked by inhuman, blind, monstrous violence and a radicalization of positions," the bishops' conference appeal noted. "Mediation is now more urgent in order in order to come out of this crisis. Please, spare our country, Cameroon, from a useless and senseless civil war!"

Advertisement

Terrorism targets church in entire region

English-speaking separatism isn't Cameroon's only security challenge.

Islamist insurgents from Boko Haram, based in neighboring Nigeria, have targeted Catholic clergy and killed hundreds of police, troops and civilians in the country's extreme north province since allying with Islamic State in 2015.

Human rights groups, including Amnesty International, have warned the English-speaking-versus-French-speaking crisis could soon escalate, and have condemned atrocities by both sides.

So have church organizations such as Vatican-based Caritas Internationalis, which warned this summer that at least 172,000 people had now been forced to flee the country, adding that "whether a person speaks English or French has become a reason to kill."

The report quoted refugees who'd crossed into Nigeria in panic, describing "running battles" between soldiers and pro-independence fighters, whole villages emptied and civilians shot on the roadside.

The brutality of the separatists, who've killed over a hundred members of the security forces, was also deplored by Msgr. Kisito Balla Onana, director of Caritas Cameroon.

With Catholic clergy now increasingly in the firing line, some observers fear a new wave of anti-church violence, as local rulers cling to power in the face of multiple insurgencies and grow increasingly intolerant of the church's peace efforts.

In the Central African Republic, where spreading violence over the past year has turned once-safe areas into war zones, church leaders have repeatedly appealed for peace and reconciliation, working with Muslim counterparts to rebuild badly strained communal ties.

Related: In central Africa, a cathedral shelters Muslims amid sectarian violence

The vicar-general of the church's Bambari Diocese, Msgr. Firmin Gbagoua, was shot dead near his cathedral in late June, only the latest in a series of attacks against Catholic clergy and parishes.

The Central African Republic, one of the world's poorest countries, has been wracked by militia fighting since 2013, when Seleka, a Muslim-dominated rebel force, briefly seized power, leaving more than half the population of 4.5 million needing humanitarian assistance.

A 13,400-strong United Nations force, MINUSCA, has been tasked with restoring order. Its troops have faced misconduct charges and failed to prevent a savage gun and grenade attack this May on Our Lady of Fatima's church in the capital of Bangui, which left 24 Catholics dead and 170 injured.

Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga of Bangui has accused foreign governments of plotting with rebel groups to inflame Christian-Muslim hostility as a way of occupying his country and controlling its natural resources. When a self-styled "League for Defense of the Church" reacted by urging counter-attacks on Muslims, its calls were swiftly rejected as "hate propaganda."

"Such projects are contrary to the Gospel and our church's aspirations," Nzapalainga and his fellow-bishops insisted in a statement.



Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga of Bangui, Central African Republic, blesses a priest after a consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Nov. 19, 2016. (CNS /Paul Haring)

Similarly, in the nearby Democratic Republic of Congo, the Catholic Church has been instrumental in attempts to curb violence by armed groups, which has 4.5 million people, half of them children, displaced in the country's Kivu, Kasai and Tanganyika provinces.

Its leaders have also sought to mediate in worsening political disputes, while urging Congo's president, Joseph Kabila, to uphold the constitution by allowing long-delayed elections.

At least 17 Catholics were killed and dozens injured in protests earlier this year, while in June, the church's Inter-Diocesan Centre in Kinshasa was raided by angry officials.

In February, bodyguards protecting Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of Kinshasa, who is a member of Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals, dispersed assailants from his residence. In July, the cardinal told journalists he was "taking measures to stay safe," such as only eating specially prepared food.

Asking the world to pay attention to human rights' violations

In countries like these, some observers think the best hope of dialogue and stability now rests with the Catholic Church. The very persistence of its peace appeals could explain why Catholic clergy are being targeted. If true, this could also throw light on developments in Cameroon, where the English-speaking crisis now threatens to spill over into a full-scale war.

In one recent commentary, the bishops' conference news agency, L'Effort Camerounais, urged the international community to "open its eyes" to "human rights abuses and extra-judicial executions" by government forces in "Ambazonia."

It said young men had been rounded up, summarily shot and "dumped in public squares as a deterrence to others," and it accused the army's spokesman, Col. Didier Badjeck, of ignoring "evidence of military atrocities that lies scattered far and wide like autumn leaves."

"Despite the frequency and magnitude of such atrocities, the government remains in denial, indicating it intends to pursue its dehumanizing acts," the church agency said. "There may be growing calls for dialogue, but the government seems to have a draconian solution to the ongoing crisis: Hit them with such brutal force that those lucky to survive will never dare raise their heads again!"

Cameroon's bishops are still engaged in legal action over the alleged murder of Bishop Jean-Marie Bala of Bafia, whose body was found floating in a river in June 2017. Although justice officials ruled it a suicide, Bala's death followed the killing of other prominent Catholic clergy; church leaders believe he was murdered.

Meanwhile, Kleda, the bishops' conference president, has continued to criticize Biya, who's been in power since 1982.

In a magazine interview in December, he urged Biya not to run again in the coming elections, and accused his backers of "seeking to protect their personal interests and retain their privileges."

In a Douala cathedral homily in January, he said society had been "plunged into moral and spiritual crisis," and was being "paralyzed and destroyed by corruption at all levels."

When shots were fired at Kleda's residence one night in May, local newspapers saw it as an attempted assassination, and linked it to the archbishop's demands for Biya's government to negotiate rather than battle it out with the English-speaking separatists.

If intended to intimidate, however, the attack clearly failed.

With no other solution on offer, despite diplomatic forays by France, the U.S., the U.N. and the Organisation of African Unity, the church has stepped up its demands for dialogue.

In April, the U.N.'s International Crisis Group commended its mediation attempts in the Anglophone crisis, acknowledging that the church appeared to be "the only actor" with the structural capacity and unifying presence to head off a full-scale conflict.

With some clergy in the church's English-speaking Bamenda Archdiocese publicly backing rebel demands, there is the danger, the International Crisis Group warned, that the church itself could become divided. But this could be overcome if its leaders were careful to avoid openly identifying with either side.

That's clearly been at the heart of Tumi's latest attempts to organize his "Anglophone General Conference" with Muslim and Protestant leaders in Buea, the southwestern regional capital.

In its report, Caritas Internationalis talked of "constant shooting" in Buea, as well as in Mamfe, Limbe, Nsan Aragati and other towns targeted for army pacification.



Chinwe Owan and William Itorok of Caritas Internationalis speak to Cameroonians April 13 in the Nigerian village of Mfamiyen. (CNS/Courtesy of Caritas Internationalis)

And on July 20, the church paid another heavy price when Fr. Alexandre Sob Nougi, the Buea Diocese's education director, was killed in a roadside incident near his Bomaka parish. Local officials said the priest had been caught in crossfire between government troops and separatists. Buea's bishop, Msgr. Immanuel Bushu, insisted he'd been shot at close range with a silencer.

Just a week later, another priest was shot dead at Widikum, in Cameroon's northwestern Bamenda Diocese, in an outrage that the Jeune Afrique weekly said left local clergy afraid to speak out.

This hasn't deterred Tumi, who's insisted his peace conference, though postponed, will still take place, with the aim of securing "a return to normal life."

Though rejecting any ceasefire with "armed bands and terrorists," Biya's government has pledged to go along with the church initiative. So have Cameroon's

opposition parties. And though nothing has changed on the ground so far, many are now hopeful the church's outreach could make a real difference.

During a single July weekend, five young men were found dead in front of a Catholic church at Tiko, while a gendarme was killed in an ambush at Mbengwi and two police were slain in a separatist attack on their outpost at Muea.

The Actualite du Cameroon news agency said troops from the country's Rapid Intervention Battalion had descended on Muea, "armed to the teeth and searching every quarter to trap the fighters," accompanied by government militia "looking furious and ready for action."

"But the Catholic Church has helped, alongside other faith leaders, at previous stages in our history — and though views and positions are now more polarized that ever, it may still succeed, thanks to its neutral background, in bringing people together," Ajumane, the Journal du Cameroun expert, told NCR.

"Cameroon's Anglophone regions must now work out what kind of the future they want. And if the central government can be persuaded to agree, we'll all have the church to thank."

[Jonathan Luxmoore covers church news from Oxford, England, and Warsaw, Poland. *The God of the Gulag* is his two-volume study of communist-era martyrs, published by Gracewing in 2016.]

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