

People climb atop a destroyed United Nations peacekeeping truck in Kanyarutshinya, Congo, Nov. 2. The truck was part of a convoy that was attacked when it stopped at an army checkpoint near an internally displaced persons camp. (CNS/Arlette Bashizi, Reuters)

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Yaoundé, Cameroon — January 30, 2023
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With Pope Francis finally able to visit the Democratic Republic of the Congo this week, there are renewed hopes in the country the pope might have an impact in helping reconcile a deeply divided people.

Francis is to visit Congo Jan. 31 to Feb. 3 before heading to South Sudan in an African tour that will end Feb. 5. The trip was initially scheduled for July 2022, but

the pope's knee problems caused the Vatican to postpone the journey.

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Congo is one of the world's wealthiest countries in terms of natural resources, but also one of its most conflict-ridden. Preparations for the visit have been intense.

Congolese Prime Minister Sama Lukonde met for the second time in a month on Dec. 5 with Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, the Vatican's ambassador to the country, to work through details of the visit.

"We met to take stock of everything that has already been done and what is missing to welcome the pope in joy and prepare well for his arrival," Balestrero told journalists shortly after the meeting.

The archbishop said Francis will arrive at the N'djili airport in the afternoon of Jan. 31 and head directly to the country's presidential palace for a meeting with President Felix Tshisekedi

On Feb. 1, the pope will celebrate a large Mass at Ndolo airport, the domestic terminal in the heart of the capital of Kinshasa. Then he is expected to meet with victims of the crisis in the eastern part of the country, where government and rebel insurgent forces backed by neighboring Rwanda have been fighting a bloody war for decades.

Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo of Kinshasa

Congolese Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo of Kinshasa is pictured in a 2018 file photo. "The Congolese nation is in danger," he recently told Vatican Radio. (CNS/Baz Ratner, Reuters)

The deputy secretary-general of the Congolese bishops' conference, Fr. George Kalenga, who is also a member of the general executive secretariat of the commission preparing for the pope's visit, told NCR that Francis will be visiting a country in turmoil. It is blighted by the "demons of tribalism, nepotism, regionalism and clientelism," said Kalenga.

He complained about political exclusion and a weakening of social ties that compromise national cohesion.

Although the original plan for the papal visit involved Francis traveling to the eastern part of the country to see the conflict zone, the current security situation has ruled out that possibility.

On Nov. 29-30, M23, a rebel group operating in eastern Congo and reportedly backed by Rwanda killed at least 131 people, according to the United Nations. Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo told Vatican Radio recently that the number killed could have reached some 300.

The meeting in Kinshasa between Francis and survivors of the conflict will remind the pope and the world about the mayhem the people living on the frontlines are going through, Kalenga told NCR.

Caritas Internationalis estimates that an astounding 6 million people were killed in the ongoing conflict between 1998 and 2007 alone.

"The Congolese nation is in danger," Ambongo, who leads the church in Kinshasa, told Vatican Radio.

Congolese President Felix Tsisekedi has frequently blamed Rwanda for the attacks.

"I have always maintained that you have to build bridges rather than walls," the president said in remarks on state television as he addressed the crisis in June.

"Unfortunately, today, we are where we are … DR Congo's neighbors should not mistake its desire for peace with weakness," he added.

"I hope that Rwanda has learned this lesson, because, today, it's clear, there is no doubt, Rwanda has supported the M23 to come and attack the DRC," he stated.

It's a charge Rwandan President Paul Kagame has denied.

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Kenyan President William Ruto came to Congo in November to host peace talks, which appeared to have since broken down.

Kalenga told NCR that he hoped the pope's visit would lead to "peace and reconciliation" in Congolese society and help end the war in the East.

Francis might not have signaled exactly what message he will be bringing to the Congo, but in July he led prayers for peace and reconciliation in one of Africa's most Catholic countries.

"A Christian always brings peace," Francis told a congregation of Congolese Christians in Rome. He said he "who stirs up rancor, incites hatred, bypasses others, does not work for Jesus, does not bring his peace."

"Today, dear brothers and sisters, we pray for peace and reconciliation in your homeland, the Democratic Republic of Congo, so wounded and exploited," said Francis.

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Congo and South Sudan** feature series. View the full series.