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An endangered east African black rhinoceros and her calf are pictured in a file photo in Tanza

An endangered east African black rhinoceros and her calf are pictured in a file photo in Tanzania's Serengeti Park. Catholic environmental activists in Africa are expressing grave concern after a group of bishops in Tanzania endorsed a proposed crude oil pipeline project, amid increasing calls to abandon fossil fuels to tackle climate changes. (OSV News/Reuters/Tom Kirkwood)

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Catholic environmental activists in Africa are expressing grave concern after a group of bishops in Tanzania endorsed a proposed crude oil pipeline project, amid increasing calls to abandon fossil fuels to tackle climate changes.

The campaigners — members of the Laudato Si' Movement in Africa — flagged this concern days after Pope Francis urged the world to quickly ditch the fuels to end "the senseless war against creation."

In East Africa, the Catholic activists were once again drawing attention to the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project, warning that it would contribute to

further greenhouse gas emissions and exacerbate the global climate change crisis.

"We are aware of the position taken by a section of bishops from the Tanzania episcopal conference," Prince Papa M'Kowiti, the programs manager for Africa at the Laudato Si' Movement, told OSV News May 31. "We urge them to reconsider their support for EACOP and advocate for a just transition away from fossil fuels."

The 898-mile pipeline is designed to transport petroleum from oil fields in Hoima in western Uganda and deliver the product to the Indian Ocean port of Tanga in Tanzania. Uganda hopes to start transporting its crude oil into international markets through the pipeline by 2025, despite the increasing opposition.

The oil pipeline was initially a business project between Uganda and Tanzania, but in early May, reports emerged indicating that Congo had started discussions with Uganda on how it could use the pipeline to transport crude oil. The entry of an additional state actor has drawn the Congo Basin into the controversial venture.

After the Amazon, the basin is the world's second largest carbon sink. A "carbon sink" removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The Congo Basin contains some of the largest tropical rainforests in the world and is an important source of water used in agriculture and energy generation.

In a video posted on the Tanzania bishops' conference website and YouTube channel, Archbishop Jude Theddaeus Ruwa'ichi of Dar es Salaam said that this is not the first oil pipeline in Tanzania.

He gave the example of the 55-year-old Tanzania Zambia Mafuta (TAZAMA) pipeline, which stretches for over 620 miles, taking crude oil from the capital, Dar es Salaam, and delivering it to the Zambian city of Ndola.

"The pipeline has been in use for many years and for the benefit of Zambia and has not drawn any controversies," Archbishop Ruwa'ichi said, explaining that when there are natural resource deposits — like petroleum — these resources need to be exploited in a manner that does not harm the people.

"I hope the Uganda-Tanga pipeline will be constructed with utmost care and consideration of the country's safety and environmental protection, but for the benefit of the people," he added.

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The archbishop said he thinks those opposed to the pipeline could be serving their own interests, since Tanzania is not the first country to exploit and benefit from petroleum resources.

Rehema Peter, a climate activist in Tanzania who is a founder of the Tanzanian Partnership for Green Future and a Laudato Si' animator, said she is "shocked" about the new bishops' position on the pipeline. She said it seemed the bishops had based their position on false solutions and needed to look at the other side of the coin.

"The project paints a picture of good economic development while the other side is the destruction of the environment. About 80% of this pipeline passes through Tanzania and will lead to so much greenhouse gas emissions, destroy the ozone layer, and potentially pollute over 200 rivers," Peter said in a May 31 statement.

"I urge them to independently look at the EACOP issue again while considering the science and research and compare it to *Laudato Si*', the message to the whole world."

Ashley Kitisya, Fossil Free campaigner for Africa at the Laudato Si' Movement, made a similar appeal, while stressing that the church's role in protecting the people and the planet were paramount.

"TEC (the Tanzania Episcopal Conference) has the unique position and moral authority to champion for social change and environmental justice, particularly that of vulnerable communities in East Africa," Kitisya told OSV.

But Richard Kakeeto, a Uganda Laudato Si' animator and a law lecturer at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, said he would not be surprised if the bishops held the view that it's OK for the two governments to industrialize and earn from fossil fuels.

"So there is some sort of patriotism emerging here (to oppose when) the West is saying you cannot drill this oil because you are going to increase carbon emission," he said, adding it would not be a surprise "if the episcopal conferences in the two countries hold similar views."

The French company Total Energies has a 62% ownership of the pipeline, which will transport 216,000 barrels per day at maximum capacity. Uganda and Tanzania each hold a 15% stake of the pipeline.

The governments of the two nations say the pipeline will bring in foreign direct investment, create jobs and spur development, but activists warn that the people likely to suffer the most impact are farmers, herders and fishing communities.

In November 2019, a public hearing on the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) conducted by Petroleum Authority of Uganda, reported that the pipeline posed significant environmental and social risks.

According to the activists, the pipeline would trigger water pollution and biodiversity degradation in the sensitive ecosystems and wildlife habitats it will pass through — including the Lake Victoria basin, Murchison Falls and the Serengeti — all legendary natural sites. It also threatens to displace local communities, hurt livelihoods and violate human rights, according to the environmentalists.

Emphasizing the gravity of the situation, M'Kowiti said, "Guided by science as well as our faith, we know that the proposed pipeline will have far more diverse negative impacts as compared to what Total Energies is telling the local and international community."