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A Black man holds his hands back while carrying a rolled up paper. Other Black men, many w

Supporters of Kenya's opposition leader Raila Odinga of the Azimio La Umoja (Declaration of Unity) One Kenya Alliance, participate in an anti-government protest against the imposition of tax hikes by the government in Nairobi July 21, 2023. (OSV News photo/Monicah Mwangi, Reuters)

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NAIROBI, Kenya — July 26, 2023

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Catholic bishops in Kenya appealed for an end to violence and for a pivot to dialogue, as scores are killed in anti-government protests.

The bishops are worried that escalating protests called by Raila Odinga, leader of opposition party Azimio La Umoja (Declaration of Unity) One Kenya Alliance, against President William Ruto’s government, have been turning too violent and disruptive -- threatening the stability of the East African nation. The opposition has rallied around new taxes and rising cost of living.

Parts of the capital, Nairobi, the port city of Mombasa, and several towns across the country became battle zones on July 19 as protesters blocked roads, burned tires and stoned cars in response to Odinga’s latest call for protests.

Archbishop Martin Kivuva Musonde of Mombasa, president of the Kenyan bishops' conference, said there was no justifiable reason for the violence, while highlighting the ensuing injuries, property damage, trauma and loss of lives.

"We are calling the leaders and the country to embrace non-violence. Kenyans and our leaders must be willing to listen to each other for the sake of peace in our country," Musonde said at the press conference July 19.

"We must at all costs avoid the loss of lives. No further blood should be shed," he stressed.

Tensions in Kenya are reverberating across the region. East Africa's biggest economy links eastern and central Africa through trade, and Nairobi hosts the U.N.'s Environmental Program. Other important diplomatic and peace organizations have headquarters in the city. Meanwhile, the international community has called for a de-escalation of violence.

"We call for calm and encourage open dialogue to address social, economic and political grievances, with the aim of identifying lasting solutions in the interest of all Kenyans," said Jeremy Laurence, the U.N. Human Rights Office spokesman, in a speech in Geneva on July 14.

Odinga, a former prime minister, has provoked protests since losing the election last year. He has accused the government of rolling back democratic gains and failing to tame inflation. Analysts in Kenya and other African regions say these concerns have partly been triggered by the war in Ukraine and by climate change-induced drought.

Since March 20, when Odinga called for "peaceful demonstrations," at least 30 people have been killed, according to Amnesty International Kenya. Property also has been destroyed and hundreds have been arrested.

Ruto has rejected the allegations and has instead accused Odinga -- who has entered and lost five consecutive presidential elections -- of "economic terrorism" and sabotage through violence.

"Kenya is the only place we have to call home and we must protect its peace by all means," Ruto told a gathering in Isiolo town on July 20.

After the first round of demonstrations in the spring, Ruto extended an olive branch to Odinga and announced bipartisan talks on April 2. The opposition suspended the

protests, but in the midst of the talks, called for a second round, accusing the government of dishonesty.

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Now the bishops want the talks resumed and expanded.

"We demand that the failed bipartisan talks should be resumed in a different context that brings on board the religious leaders and some other eminent persons and bodies," said Musonde. "We believe that there is no problem, however difficult, that cannot be solved through dialogue."

At the same time, the bishops warn that disappointment and disillusionment due to severe economic distress among many Kenyans was driving the current grave agitation and anger.

"The high cost of living has created a burden on individuals and families, making it difficult for them to meet their basic needs and maintain a decent standard of living," said Archbishop Anthony Muheria of Nyeri, reading parts of the Kenyan bishops' statement in Nairobi on July 19.

"We realize that many are struggling to afford essential goods and services, to secure stable employment, or are facing financial hardships that affect education and health care access," he said.

According to the bishops, within this context, the recent Finance Act placed an unsustainable burden on the already struggling citizens, especially those within the low-income bracket.

The act, which the president signed on June 26, introduced new raft taxes and increased existing ones. It also came into effect at a time when prices of basic food products, including corn, grains and flour had risen considerably in the past year.

The government said it needs the money from the taxes to fund development projects and pay a high debt allegedly incurred after the previous government over-borrowed to fund infrastructure projects. The bishops want the law shelved to ease the burden on the citizens.

"We, therefore, ask the president to repeal the Finance Act and institute a process that will seek to achieve the same goals with the current economic context," Muheria said.

The bishops have also strongly condemned police’s use of excessive force to break the demonstrations, instead urging the service to target criminals disguised as protesters. Human rights groups say the officers have been firing live ammunition on the protesters.

"We want to emphasize a firm stance against such acts of violence and abuse of power … . They cannot take advantage to brutalize innocent Kenyans," Muheria said.

July 26 was initially planned to be another day of protests, but the Kenyan opposition has called them off, asking people instead to show solidarity with those that lost their lives or have been injured during the demonstrations. They have asked that Kenyans memorialize the dead with flowers and candles, while wearing white. The government has warned that protests in whatever form will not be allowed.