News



Parents of pupils who died during a fatal fire react Sept. 6, 2024, at the Hillside Endarasha Academy in Kieni, in the central Kenyan county of Nyeri. (OSV News/Monicah Mwangi, Reuters)

Frank Nzwili

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As Kenya mourned the 21 young boys killed in a school dormitory fire Sept. 6 in Kieni, Archbishop Anthony Muheria of Nyeri said the church was heartbroken and urged Christians to stay close to the affected families.

The tragedy at the Hillside Endarasha Academy in the central Kenyan county of Nyeri has drawn anger and shock, as Kenyans recall similar tragedies and a promise for government action on safety in schools. As of Sept. 9, 17 children remained missing.

Pope Francis sent his condolences and prayers to the families of victims in a Sept. 7 telegram.

The pope said he was "deeply saddened" to learn of the loss of young lives, expressing his "spiritual closeness to all who are suffering the effects of this calamity, especially the injured and the families who grieve."

On Sept. 9, anxious parents and relatives emotionally waited for DNA test results to identify bodies, some of which were burned beyond recognition. Churches joined together for interdenominational prayers at the school Sept. 8, as parents, relatives and ordinary citizens teared up openly, crushed by the tragedy.

Muheria said nothing could offer enough consolation to a parent or family for the loss of a child, as he invited the families affected by the tragedy to find recourse in God's mercy.

"We are also heartbroken for the loss of these little ones. … I ask all our Christians to offer special prayers for those who have lost their lives and also for the families," said the archbishop in a Sept. 6 statement. "To you Christians of Endarasha, stay close to all families as much as you are able in your Small Christian Communities."

The government announced a three-day mourning period Sept. 9-11, during which national flags will fly half-staff. The fire ripped a dormitory that housed 156 grade 4-

8 pupils between 9 and 13 years old. Another 27 were also critically injured.

Muheria said the church also wished to remain close in prayer to many other people from across the country affected by the tragedy.

"We can only feel a bit of your pain, but God knows and we ask him to give you strength and peace," said the archbishop.

In his Sept. 7 telegram, sent to Kenyan President William Ruto by the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Francis commended the souls of the dead to the "loving mercy of Almighty God" and offered his "prayers for the personnel and the civil authorities who continue to provide assistance."

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Ruto had earlier sent his condolences to the families, while pledging answers to difficult questions as to how the tragedy occurred and why the response to it was late.

The country's president said the loss "evokes a unique sense of anger, bitterness, sorrow and emptiness."

In the recent past, Kenya has experienced a series of deadly school fire tragedies.

In 1998, 26 girls perished in Bombululu Girls Secondary School in a stampede as they attempted to escape from a burning dormitory. In 2001, a dormitory fire tragedy in Kyanguli Secondary School in Machakos Country killed 67 boys aged 15-19 years.

A 2020 report by the auditor general warned that Kenyan secondary schools were ill-prepared to respond to fire outbreaks and did not adhere to safety standards. A safety manual, released in 2008 — for example — requires schools to install dormitory doors that open outward.

Some schools have fixed grills on windows, which make it difficult for students to escape in case of a fire. The dormitories are also often overcrowded, a case that was evident in the academy where the latest fire tragedy occurred, according to some sources.