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Residents leave a flooded area with their belongings during rescue operations in Maiduguri, Nigeria, Sept. 12, 2024. Severe floods have ravaged northeastern Nigeria, displacing more than 640,000 people, according to the United Nations. (OSV News/Ahmed Kingimi, Reuters)

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Maiduguri, Nigeria — September 20, 2024
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Catholic leaders in northeastern Nigeria appealed for prayers and humanitarian support as devastating floods engulfed Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, known as the epicenter of the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram's insurgency.

The floods have engulfed St. Patrick's Cathedral, along with its rectory and the secretariat of the Maiduguri Diocese, forcing priests to move to safer grounds. It has also hit other three Catholic parishes in the city and the St. Pius X Parish in Shuwa — about 80 miles southeast of Maiduguri.

"We are deeply devastated by the flood," Auxiliary Bishop John Bakeni of Maiduguri said in a statement sent to OSV News Sept. 18. "Our hearts go out to the families who have tragically lost their loved ones, homes and livelihoods in this calamity."

The bishop said the diocese was soliciting special prayers of God's strength and consolation for the families and all those affected by the floods, and he said an estimated 1 million people are suffering the consequences of the catastrophe, including 20,000 Catholics.

"While asking for your earnest prayers at this critical time, we also appeal for financial support to enable the diocese to support the victims of the flood. ... The urgent needs now are food, medical/sanitation and temporary shelter," he said.

The widespread flooding, which began Sept. 8 and worsened in the following days, has been caused by excess water from the Alau Dam, a crucial water reservoir on the Ngadda River, about 12 miles south of Maiduguri.

The collapse of the spillways unleashed a significant surge of water downstream, striking communities that were starting to rebuild their lives after years of Islamist

violence in a state where Christians are a minority.

"This disaster serves as a sober reminder of the increasing threats posed by climate change, not just globally, but particularly to regions like ours," said the bishop.

At least 30 people have died in the city of Maiduguri — the humanitarian hub in the conflict-hit northeast, according to reports. The diocese estimates 410,000 people were displaced following the floods.

Bakeni added that "efforts are ongoing by government and relevant agencies to evacuate and resettle residents in the affected areas," and they are also "on the way to ensure the provision of food, shelter, and medical assistance. I must say that the situation is overwhelming."

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"The IDP (internally displaced people) camps that were officially closed by the government have been reopened to accommodate people," he said.

The floods officials describe as the worst in 30 years also swept away a state-owned zoo, sending crocodiles and snakes into the communities. It also swept away the Islamic cemetery in the city, sending dead bodies floating. Authorities said 270 inmates are missing after the floods damaged a prison in the city.

Bakeni said in a video message sent to the pontifical charity Aid to the Church in Need that over 40% of the city was under water.

"We are still carrying out our assessment, but three or four parishes of ours have been affected, and over 20,000 parishioners have been affected," he said in the video, which urged ACN's donors and friends to offer prayers and support.

ACN said Sept. 13 it was also making an urgent appeal for prayers and support for the affected community. The global charity has been actively supporting the local church in reconstruction efforts after years of terrorist attacks by Boko Haram. The foundation said it had contacted its project partners to determine the extent of the damage, its impact on the community and the immediate needs of the affected population.

Apart from Maiduguri, the floods have also ravaged 30 out of 36 of Nigeria's states. According to the United Nations, the floods in the country have killed 269 people and displaced over 640,000.