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Displaced Congolese wait along a road in North Kivu Feb. 3, 2025, for transportation back to their villages, days after the M23 rebel group seized the city of Goma, forcing thousands to flee and triggering a wave of looting and deaths. The rebels agreed to a unilateral ceasefire Feb. 4 to allow agencies to respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis. (OSV News/Arlette Bashizi, Reuters)

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Goma, Congo — February 6, 2025
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As an uneasy calm returned to the Congolese city of Goma, following a unilateral ceasefire declared by the rebels, people began burying the dead, and agencies rushed aid to thousands of displaced civilians, now camping in churches and schools.

Congolese bishops said Feb. 3 they're following the situation "with great sadness and concern," offering closeness and support for local pastors and consoling those that lost loved ones. They also urged people to follow the call they made in January, inviting "every Congolese and every Citizen of the Great Lakes Region to say and say each time the need arises: My priority is Peace and Living Well Together."

The M23 rebels agreed to a ceasefire that started Feb. 4 to allow agencies to respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis. The group also halted its advance toward the city of Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province. With the ceasefire, people in Goma rushed to bury what locals say may be as many as 2,000 bodies of the victims of the fighting.

The United Nations confirmed at least 900 people died in the fighting and another million were displaced, but the full scale of the human toll is still emerging. Many of those who died are women and children who fled villages and camps to Goma, as the rebels advanced on the city.

On Jan. 27, news broke that the rebels of the March 23 movement claimed they had seized the city after a deadly battle with the Congolese army, known by the French acronym FARDC. Goma is a humanitarian base of the eastern Congo provinces of North and South Kivu.

Archbishop Fulgence Muteba Mugalu of Lubumbashi, president of Congo's bishops' conference, said that "the situation is so serious and the emotions so intense that they have required us to take a moment of silence to better understand the shape (of things) and discern the future prospects."

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In the Feb. 3 statement the archbishop highlighted the enormous loss of life in the fighting, extensive looting in Goma and the surrounding cities, and the increased displacement of the people of the region already impoverished by conflicts that have recurred for the last 30 years.

"When one member suffers, the whole body suffers. We reassure all our brothers and sisters in the disaster-stricken provinces of our communion in their sorrows and spiritual closeness," Mugalu said.

On Jan. 29, Pope Francis called for cessation of hostilities, protection of civilians in Goma and other regions, and a quick end to the violence.

Mugalu said that the Congolese bishops reiterated the peace strategy the conference launched together with other Christian churches in January.

The peace road map titled "The Social Pact for Peace and Living Well Together" in Congo and the Great Lakes, invites the people of the region to interact and hold dialogue to build lasting peace.

"Why are we no longer able to resolve our problems under the palaver tree as our ancestors wisely used to do?" asked Congolese church leaders, with Msgr. Donatien Nshole, secretary general of the bishops' conference, and the Rev. Eric Nsenga of the Church of Christ in Congo signing the Jan. 15 document.

"Day after day, time is running out and the dark prospects of a humanitarian catastrophe, the incalculable consequences are becoming clearer," the two leaders warned .

Catholic agencies are some of those responding to the crisis. An estimated 2,000 people camped at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Ndosho, on the outskirts of Goma, while another 1,600 have settled in a nearby school, according to Fides, the news agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

Caritas, the humanitarian arm of the Catholic Church, said Feb. 4 that access to food, drinking water and essential services had become arduous, with hospitals running out of medicines as the number of people seeking treatment swell. The agency reported extreme fear in Goma, following attacks including sexual violence.