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A Sudanese woman prepares food at Takaya, a charity restaurant and a community kitchen, during the holy month of Ramadan in the state of Khartoum in Sudan March 14, 2025. The kitchen helps feed the displaced Sudanese in the Omdurman area recently controlled by army during the ongoing conflict. (OSV News/Reuters/El Tayeb Siddig)

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Juba, South Sudan — April 2, 2025
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Pope Francis appealed to South Sudan leaders to "lower the tension in the country" as Catholic bishops in Sudan and South Sudan expressed alarm at the escalating violence in the world's youngest nation and warned of a catastrophe if full-scale war returns.

"I am following the situation in South Sudan with concern," the pope said in his Angelus address released March 30. "I renew my heartfelt appeal to all leaders to do their utmost to lower the tension in the country. We must put aside our differences and, with courage and responsibility, sit around a table and engage in constructive dialogue," the pontiff said.

"Only in this way will it be possible to alleviate the suffering of the beloved South Sudanese people and to build a future of peace and stability."

Fears of renewed war have been looming since early March, when the White Army, a Nuer ethnic youth militia, overran the national army units in Nasir County, Upper Nile state, South Sudan has been on the brink of a new war.

The conflict escalated on March 7, when an army general and over 20 soldiers were killed in the area near the Ethiopian border after a United Nations helicopter on a rescue mission was shot down in fierce fighting.

President Salva Kiir's government has responded with aerial strikes in the area, reportedly with support of Uganda People's Defense Forces.

Riek Machar, South Sudan's first vice president, is now under house arrest for alleged ties with the White Army.

The clashes, arrests of political leaders and "the increasing displacement of civilians — especially women and children — mark a tragic reversal of the peace we have all longed and prayed for," Cardinal Ameyu Martin Mulla of Juba, president of the Sudan and South Sudan Catholic bishops' conference, and other bishops said in a March 28

statement.

South Sudan descended into a civil war in December 2013 following a political dispute between Kiir and Machar. Triggered barely two years after the country's independence in 2011, the war killed an estimated 400,000 people and displaced another 2 million.

The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, signed in 2018 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, ended countrywide fighting and allowed the formation of a transitional government.

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Francis had his role in bringing together worrying sides of the conflict.

On April 12, 2019, Francis repeatedly knelt and kissed the feet of South Sudan's political leaders at the end of a spiritual retreat at the Vatican.

The action has resounded across Africa, with ordinary South Sudanese citizens, clerics, politicians and civil society groups celebrating it as a major boost for the fragile peace in the world's newest nation. Now, the country seems again descending into chaos.

"People are sad and worrying about the political wrangling within the government. Coupled with the economic meltdown, the common people are seeing no sign of leadership that considers their sufferings," Fr. John Gbemboyo Joseph Mbikoyezu, the coordinator of the South Sudan Catholic bishops' conference, told OSV News.

Mulla and fellow bishops recalled Francis' words during the visit to the country Feb. 3, 2023: "no more bloodshed, no more conflicts, no more violence. Let there be peace," as they reiterated that the people of South Sudan had suffered for too long.

"War has taken their children, their homes, their future and yet again, the dark clouds of conflict hover over our nation," they said.

The bishops warned that the arrest of opposition leaders and the involvement of foreign military forces have only served to heighten fear and mistrust.

"Such actions risk turning our beloved country into a battleground for external interests and political manipulation," the bishops said, cautioning that if South Sudan returned to full-scale violence, the consequences would be catastrophic.

"The loss of human life, the collapse of national unity and the breakdown of already fragile institutions will devastate future generations."

While expressing the church's readiness to mediate in the conflict, the bishops urged the civil society, youth and women groups, traditional leaders, the international community and all people of goodwill to rally against the war and unite for peace.

Mbikoyezu said when the doors to dialogue are left open, the people see hope.

"The bottom line is that people are tired of war and conflicts and would like to live in peace, but so far, there seems to be no dialogue among the leaders concerned."

After the arrest of their leader, Machar's party declared the revitalized peace agreement was canceled, as pressure for his release, a cessation of hostilities and return to dialogue continued to rise.

The U.S Bureau of African Affairs said in a post on X that it was concerned about reports that Machar was under house arrest.

"We urge President Kiir to reverse this action" and "prevent further escalation of the situation."
"It is time," it added, "for South Sudan's leaders to demonstrate sincerity of stated commitments to peace."

Nicholas Haysom, the head of the U.N. Mission in South Sudan, urged a cessation of hostilities and a return constructive dialogue.

"The country leaders stand on the brink of relapsing into widespread conflict or taking the country forward towards peace, recovery and democracy," he said in a statement.