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Faithful wait for the arrival of Pope Leo XIV at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, on the 10th day of his 11-day pastoral visit to Africa, in Mongomo, Equatorial Guinea, Wednesday, April 22, 2026. (AP/Misper Apawu)

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BATA, Equatorial Guinea — April 22, 2026

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Pope Leo XIV told inmates at one of Equatorial Guinea's notorious prisons on Wednesday that they are not alone, as he delivered a message of hope during a visit that drew attention to prison conditions, human rights abuses and injustices that campaigners have denounced for years here.

Leo's visit to the prison in the Central African port city of Bata followed in the tradition of Pope Francis, who frequently met with inmates on his foreign visits to give them a message of hope.

But Leo's stop, at the end of his four-nation African tour, took on added significance after it emerged that Equatorial Guinea was one of several African nations that have been paid millions of dollars in controversial deals with the Trump administration to receive migrants deported from the U.S. to countries other than their own.

While none of those migrants are being held at Bata, the visit put the spotlight on Equatorial Guinea's overall human rights record and its judiciary, which rights campaigners have criticized for its lack of independence, arbitrary detentions and other abuses.

"You are not alone. Your families love you and are waiting for you. Many people outside these walls are praying for you," Leo told the inmates in Spanish. "If any of you fear being abandoned by everyone, know that God will never abandon you, and that the Church will stand by your side."

The inmates, all dressed in new neon orange and beige uniforms, had gathered in a central courtyard of the prison, which appeared to have been recently painted salmon pink. As soon as he started speaking, a huge rainstorm opened, drenching the inmates.

In his remarks, Leo also reminded authorities that justice is meant to protect society, but that incarceration is not meant to be punishment alone.

"To be effective, it must always promote the dignity and potential of every person," he said. "True justice seeks not so much to punish as to help rebuild the lives of victims, offenders and communities wounded by evil."

After Leo left, the drenched inmates broke into a raucous dance party in the courtyard as the rain continued to pour, shouting "Libertad! Libertad! Libertad!" (Freedom, freedom, freedom).

'Greater room for freedom'

Leo began the day with Mass in Mongomo, an eastern city on the border with Gabon that has experienced major development since Equatorial Guinea's oil boom in the 1990s.

President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has been accused of widespread corruption and authoritarianism in his four-decade rule, comes from Mongomo and the city has benefited from government investment and infrastructure, even though no official institutions are located here.

While more than half of Equatorial Guinea's population lives in poverty, Mongomo boasts opulent buildings, curated gardens behind gilt-tipped gates, an 18-hole golf course and is the starting point of the lone highway in the country, linking the city to Bata on the west coast.

Obiang and his wife were on hand for Leo's Mass, as was their son, Teodoro "Teddy" Nguema Obiang, the country's vice president who was convicted of embezzling millions of euros by a French court, which handed him a three-year suspended sentence, a 30 million euro ($35.2 million) fine and ordered the seizure of his luxury homes and cars in France worth tens of millions of euros. The country has protested the seizures at the International Court of Justice.

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Last year, the United States gave the younger Obiang a temporary waiver on U.S. corruption sanctions so he could travel to a U.N. gathering and visit other American cities. Obiang also met with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau.

The Vatican said an estimated 100,000 people attended the Mass, most standing in the grand entryway to Mongomo's Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. The monumental church was consecrated in 2011 and is modeled on St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

In his homily, Leo urged all citizens to work together to build a society "capable of engendering a new sense of justice," where there is "greater room for freedom" and where "the dignity of the human person always may be safeguarded."

He urged everyone, according to their roles, to work to "serve the common good rather than private interests, bridging the gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged."

"My thoughts go to the poorest, to families experiencing difficulty and to prisoners who are often forced to live in troubling hygienic and sanitary conditions," he said.

'Troubling disregard for human life'

Equatorial Guinea's prisons and justice system have been repeatedly faulted by the United Nations and condemned by human rights groups and the U.S. State Department.

In its 2023 report on the country, the U.S. listed a host of abuses, including arbitrary or unlawful killings and arrests, political detentions, torture, life-threatening prison conditions and "serious problems" with the judiciary's independence.

Speaking to journalists at the Bata prison, Equatorial Guinea Justice Minister Reginaldo Biyogo Ndong denied the rights abuses and said the country's prison and justice systems respect international human rights laws. He said the country's justice system features an "enviable" infrastructure and that it's "ready to guarantee human rights, fundamental rights."

On the eve of his prison visit, 70 human rights organizations published an open letter to Leo, urging him to speak out especially about the U.S. deportation of migrants here and encourage African nations to not be complicit.

"These practices circumvent humanitarian protections, expose refugees to detention and coercion, and subject individuals to refoulement, in direct contravention of international law," they wrote.

In the run-up to Leo's arrival, the government released nearly 100 people who had been arrested in a 2022 crackdown on street violence, according to a local lawyer, who requested anonymity given the country's human rights record.

The lawyer termed the releases one "positive outcome" of the visit but also noted that the government still hasn't taken action on releasing jailed activists and politicians.

EG Justice, a rights group which has repeatedly denounced the detention of political prisoners in Equatorial Guinea, urged Leo to use his moral authority to speak out about abuses and the detention of activists and politicians especially.

"There are individuals — prisoners of conscience, and human rights activists — in detention whose cases raise serious humanitarian and due process concerns," said Tutu Alicante, a U.S.-based activist who runs the EG Justice group.

This story appears in the **Leo XIV in North and Central Africa** feature series. View the full series.