

## South African bishops ask world to help resolve Zimbabwean crisis

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CAPE TOWN, South Africa (CNS) -- The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference has called on the international community to work with leaders in the region to resolve the political crisis in Zimbabwe.

"We are deeply concerned at this situation and warn that unless there is a unified effort from the international community, with the leadership of southern African countries, the hopeless situation of violence, famine and uncertainty will result in a vast humanitarian crisis that will engulf the whole southern African region," bishops from South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland said June 24.

In the statement issued by South African Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of Durban, conference spokesman, the bishops called for "a consensus model of government that involves all Zimbabweans" to be established by the international community in cooperation with the Southern African Development Community.

While the conference "passionately supports" the "legitimate aspiration" of Zimbabweans to choose their president in a fair election, "the politically motivated violence, intimidation and torture have made a just and fair runoff presidential election virtually impossible," the bishops said.

"A 'winner-takes-all' solution that rewards the ruling party for its atrocities and criminal mismanagement will only entrench the sufferings of the most vulnerable," they said.

The crisis was magnified June 22 when Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, said his party decided to withdraw from the June 27 presidential runoff against President Robert Mugabe because violence in the country had made a fair vote impossible.

Citing the growing violence and the action of Tsvangirai's party, the bishops said the election has "degenerated into a sham."

The opposition's choice "to try to protect the lives of supporters and others who have been targeted is understandable," they said.

"The alternative would have been an undeclared civil war," they said.

Independent human rights groups say 85 people have died since the March 29 elections when Tsvangirai outpolled Mugabe but did not receive a majority of votes. Tens of thousands, most of them opposition supporters, also have been displaced from their homes.

"We, together with other organizations, warn that the atrocities and barbarism of (Mugabe's ruling party) ZANU-PF are being documented," the bishops said in the statement. Mugabe's "actions and those of his generals, their wives, his thug supporters and the so-called war veterans are offensive in the eyes of God. Judgment awaits," they said.

People must continue to ask who is benefiting from Zimbabwe's crisis, the bishops said.

"We, the Catholic bishops of southern Africa, believe that the actions of the incumbent ruling elite deserve rigorous censure. They are a blight on every African," they said.

"We call on the member states of the African Union to register their commitment to democracy in Zimbabwe by rejecting the legal fiction that this election has become and by not recognizing Robert Mugabe and his party as the legitimate government," they said.

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