

Bishop: Interfaith tensions worsen in Ethiopia

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | Mar. 18, 2011

OXFORD, England -- A Catholic bishop in Ethiopia said he thought interfaith tensions were worsening in western parts of the country.

After a rampage by Muslims left dozens of Christian churches in ruins, Christian leaders met and "pledged to prevent this from happening again," said Bishop Theodorus van Ruijven, the Dutch-born bishop of Nekemte. He also said Muslim leaders promised to help rebuild what was destroyed.

"But Islamic missionaries are coming from Somalia and preaching to local Muslims, telling them they'll be raised up and get to heaven sooner if they do something to strengthen the Islamic faith here," he told Catholic News Service in a March 17 telephone interview.

The bishop said Catholic churches were not directly targeted by the attackers, who destroyed Protestant and Orthodox churches and schools and ransacked private homes earlier in the month in Ethiopia's Oromia region. However, he added that the rapid expansion of Muslim communities had created tensions, fuelling wider uncertainties about the future.

"Catholics are just a small, quiet minority in this area, so Muslims have a different attitude to us, and we generally enjoy good relations with Muslim leaders," said Bishop van Ruijven. "But Protestant groups are much more conspicuous -- they are more excitable and make a lot of noise. This appears to have fuelled conflicts with Muslims."

At least one Orthodox Christian was killed and dozens injured when thousands of Muslim protesters launched the attacks March 2 in and around Asendabo, 190 miles west of Addis Ababa, after accusing a local Christian of tearing up a copy of the Quran.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi condemned the violence at a March 14 news conference and pledged "decisive steps" to prevent further disorder in the country, where Catholics made up just 1 percent of the population of 83 million in a 2007.

The Rev. Wakseyoum Idosa, president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church, said Christians wanted "clear answers as to what happened," and said church leaders were working with Ethiopia's federal Islamic supreme council and its local representatives to restore peace.

"Followers of Christianity and Islam have been living here peacefully and harmoniously in mutual tolerance. But it's clear certain extremists are trying to use religion as an instrument for disturbing the peace and working hard to use the ensuing conflict for political ends. This is what we're hearing from people in the areas affected," he said.

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