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Zimbabwean fears priests could be targeted

by Bronwen Dachs by Catholic News Service

CAPE TOWN, South Africa -- The national director of Zimbabwe's Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace said he fears that priests could be victimized after a recent commission statement urging political leaders to intervene to stop politically motivated skirmishes in the capital, Harare.

Bishops and priests were targeted after the country's bishops spoke out against political intolerance early this year "and the same could easily happen now," Alouis Chaumba said in a July 5 telephone interview with Catholic News Service from Harare.

A surge in violence in Harare's Mbare township has forced some men to visit their families secretly at night to "avoid being caught by politically dogmatic groups" opposed to democratic rights, the commission said in a July 3 statement.

"In extreme cases, some Mbare families have lost their houses to people who belong to other political parties," it said.

Most perpetrators of the violence are "shipped" into Mbare, traditionally a stronghold of Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change, it said.

It is "very disturbing for priests" when they are threatened, as "sometimes happens when people demand to see a priest after Mass and accuse him of preaching in a party-political way," Chaumba said.

The commission will try to document cases of intimidation after its July 3 statement, he said.

A priest at St. Peter's Church in Mbare, Jesuit Father Oskar Wermter, said he and other priests in the area "are always aware that what we say is being noted" by President Robert Mugabe's loyalists.

"This is nothing new," he said in a July 4 telephone interview, noting that "they have been listening in to our telephone conversations for at least 10 years."

In June, Father Wermter told Catholic News Service that incidences of violence are "increasing dangerously" in Zimbabwe.

Rights groups in Zimbabwe report an increase in mob attacks, threats, assaults and questionable arrests by police in 2011 and say that militants and security forces loyal to Mugabe have previously led political violence.

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Mbare market stalls have been seized, household goods and personal belongings confiscated and streets around a medical clinic have become "so unapproachable and inhospitable" that the clinic has become a no-go zone, the justice and peace commission said.

Assault victims and patients in need of HIV treatment are afraid seek care or collect their medication at the clinic, it said.

Noting that the Mbare violence "is imported" and that "most people behind the violence are not permanent residents in the area," the commission quoted victims saying that they were being punished for "participating in political associations of their choice."

It urged political leaders to realize that votes are won by maintaining justice and human rights.

"How, for example, can a person who dislocated his jaw in political violence vote for the political party responsible for dislocating it?" the commission asked.

Mugabe's party, which blames the Movement for Democratic Change for starting the violence, is campaigning for as-yet-unscheduled elections.

Regional mediators have cautioned against early polls and propose a longer-term "roadmap" that would include electoral changes and revisions of the voters' lists.

Research has shown that as many as 27 percent of Zimbabwe's 5.5 million listed voters have died and many others are under voting age or are registered in more than one voting district.

In an address to members of the Zion Christian Church in April, Mugabe accused Zimbabwe's Catholic bishops of being liars and puppets of the West.

Also in April, Father Marko Mkandla was arrested along with a government minister in Lupane, northwest of Bulawayo, accused of holding a gathering that police had not authorized.

The bishops said in a January pastoral letter that, without "sincere engagement" between the parties in the coalition government, Zimbabwe "will continue to be dogged by violence, political intolerance, hate language in the public media, injustice, rigging of elections, fear and deception."

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