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# Faith groups seek support for reforms in Malawi

Bronwen Dachs Catholic News Service | Aug. 30, 2011

**CAPE TOWN, South Africa** -- Faith groups in Malawi are calling for international support as they seek major reforms in the southern African country, a Catholic church official said.

"Malawians are desperate for a government that responds to their concerns," said Chris Chisoni, national secretary of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace.

Nineteen people died in Malawi in clashes with police during July 20-21 protests against government policies and a shortage of fuel and foreign currency.

The Public Affairs Committee, which includes Catholic bishops, Protestant and Muslim representatives, has called for a "proper investigation with the support" of the Southern African Development Community and the United Nations into the clashes and their causes, Chisoni said in an Aug. 26 telephone interview from the capital, Lilongwe.

The United States and Britain have cut aid to Malawi, which depends on donors for as much as 40 percent of its budget, because of disagreements with President Bingu wa Mutharika and the police response to protests.

"Urgent steps must be taken to ensure that solutions are found to the crisis," Chisoni said, noting that "human rights reforms and transparent governance" are needed "to ensure that diplomatic and bilateral relationships are restored."

Malawi's opposition parties are "too caught up in infighting to be an effectively organized opposition, and so it is left to civil society and the church to look out for the interests of ordinary citizens," he said.

Bishop Joseph Mukasa Zuza of Mzuzu, who chairs the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, invoked the president's ire when he told Mutharika that he should stop gagging Malawi's civil society, media and the faith community, noting that they have a role to play in safeguarding the rule of law.

Malawi's social, political and economic problems "are of our own making depending on our respective roles," Bishop Zuza said in a sermon at an Aug. 16 National Day of Prayer in Blantyre, the commercial capital.

Responding to the bishop's remarks in an Aug. 25 speech in Blantyre, Mutharika said he would "deal with the nongovernmental organizations which are leading people to protest against my leadership," adding that his "patience is wearing thin, let us fight."

In an Aug. 26 press statement, the Public Affairs Committee called Mutharika's comments "unacceptable" and "misplaced."

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