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In South Sudan conflict, churches attacked, looted

Fredrick Nzwili Religion News Service | Jan. 29, 2014

African church leaders are urging parties in the South Sudanese conflict to respect places of worship, after rebels attacked and looted church compounds in the town of Malakal.

The Roman Catholic Cathedral of Malakal was looted at gunpoint, forcing priests and civilians to flee, a regional church leader said.

Catholic and Presbyterian churches, a hospital and an orphanage have become safe havens for refugees escaping the fighting in the city.

"I came to know myself what it means to be asked for something under the threat of a gun when a group in uniform stopped me on the way from the hospital to the church," said one Catholic priest, who did not give his name because he fears for his safety. "They blocked me and took my watch and a key."

The conflict began Dec. 15 after President Salva Kiir alleged that his former deputy Riek Machar was planning a coup and arrested several senior politicians. (Seven of the 12 politicians arrested then were released Wednesday.) Since the conflict started, soldiers loyal to Kiir and rebels aligned with Machar have been engaged in bloody battles across the country.

The fighting has taken on an ethnic dimension, pitting Kiir's Dinka tribe and Machar's Nuer one.

Fighting has been heaviest in Malakal, which is seen as a gateway to oilfields in the north. Rebels looted shops and businesses there in mid-January before turning to homes and churches.

"We urge the fighters to respect the places of worship," said the Rev. Ferdinand Lugonzo, general secretary of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa. "They should not force out civilians who already feel safe in the church compounds."

Churches have been providing aid to victims of the conflict with support from international relief organizations. As of Jan. 18, the Catholic cathedral in the town was harboring 6,500 refugees.

The U.N. compound is hosting an additional 20,000. More than 600,000 people have been displaced in the fighting countrywide.

"We first thought this was spontaneous and the rebels were simply looking for houses to loot, but the attack on churches, which are clearly marked, is very disturbing," said Lugonzo. "At all costs these premises must be revered."

Although both sides signed a cease-fire agreement last week at peace talks in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, clashes have continued, with both sides being accused of human rights abuses.

Church leaders have urged expansion of the talks to include the religious leaders and the international

community.

Christians played a crucial role in South Sudan's independence, reconciling fighting factions, providing services and building structures. The groups now fear that all these facilities may be at risk of destruction.

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