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Nuncio says priests targeted in Ivory Coast

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | Mar. 31, 2011

WARSAW, Poland -- The Vatican's representative to the Ivory Coast has said Catholic priests have been targeted by armed groups during the current conflict, but added that he still hopes "full-scale civil war" can be avoided in the West African country.

In Rome, officials of Caritas Internationalis, the church's charitable aid agency, said one of the priests kidnapped was Father Richard Kissi, diocesan director of Caritas in Abidjan, who was kidnapped March 29 by an armed group.

In a March 30 telephone interview, the nuncio, Archbishop Ambrose Madtha, told Catholic News Service, "I wouldn't call it a civil war as yet -- the rebel army has been trying to attack certain cities, and this is why the violence is continuing."

He said students at the main Catholic seminary in Abidjan, the country's largest city, had been evacuated after its buildings were occupied by rebel soldiers. He added that a Catholic priest had been abducted while helping supervise the evacuation, while another had been attacked while returning from a late-night radio broadcast and had been hospitalized. He would not identify the priests by name.

But in Rome March 31, Caritas said Father Kissi was kidnapped by an armed group while he was heading to Anyama, a suburb of Abidjan, to evacuate seminarians. Caritas said its officials in Ivory Coast had not heard from him, and investigations into his whereabouts had been unsuccessful.

"We do not know whether Father Kissi is well and have not received any claims from the kidnappers," said Jean Djoman, director of human development at Caritas in Ivory Coast.

Archbishop Madtha said that, during the fighting, "both sides have generally respected Catholic churches, although soldiers have also entered at least one in search of rebels."

"We can only hope political leaders and the people attached to them will now hear the appeals for peace and pay more attention to what they are doing," he said.

Communal violence flared after President Laurent Gbagbo refused to recognize Alassane Ouattara's victory in a Nov. 28 runoff that was expected to return the French-speaking country to stability following a 2002-03 civil war and subsequent economic stagnation.

More than 460 people have been killed, and at least a million forced to flee during the conflict, according to the United Nations, which has 9,000 peacekeeping troops in Ivory Coast, monitoring a 2003 cease-fire.

Fighting intensified in late March as rebel forces advanced on and entered Yamoussoukro from strongholds in the North, as well as toward the key cocoa-exporting port of San Pedro in the southwest.

Amnesty International reported March 31 that at least 10,000 people in Duekoue, Ivory Coast, went to the local

Salesian-run mission seeking help after rebel forces loyal to Ouattara conquered Duekoue, where the mission had already received 5,000 refugees.

ANS, the Salesian news agency, reported that the Salesians were no longer able to provide cover for all the refugees, and the night of March 30 the area had rain. The agency said March 31 that the mission had been without electricity or running water for three days and needed help from humanitarian agencies.

The ANS report said Ouattara supporters completely looted the Carrefour district of the city March 30. It said attackers forced residents to leave their homes and all their belongings, then looted and burned the houses.

"Many witnesses report that the refugees were told to go to the Salesian mission," said the report. "These same witnesses also speak about young men being executed on suspicion of taking part in the fighting or of belonging to the local armed militia."

"People think the churches are safe places, so they usually flock to Catholic compounds whenever there's a problem," said Archbishop Madtha. "At the beginning, no one here believed this conflict would last so long. But it's already passed four months, and we simply don't know where it will end."

Pope Benedict XVI has appealed for peace in the region and said he would send Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, to Ivory Coast as his envoy.

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