

Lusaka archbishop warns of disaster

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LUSAKA, Zambia -- Lusaka Archbishop Telesphore Mpundu warned of a "huge disaster" if political authorities do not take decisive action to discourage their supporters from engaging in acts of violence.

"Although Zambians are generally peaceful and long-suffering people, those we elect to rule us should always bear in mind that there is limit to people's patience and resilience, as recent events in North Africa and the Middle East can testify," Archbishop Mpundu said. "Law enforcement institutions seem to be powerless and paralyzed into inaction while people are beaten up in their presence and absence alike."

The archbishop said it was sad that those who perpetrated political violence could not be arrested even though they were well-known.

"These cadres ... act with impunity, maiming innocent citizens, threatening others with unprintable atrocities in the open, insulting even public figures and terrorizing commuters at bus and railway stations, at marketplaces and even at the international airport at will," he said.

"These are not faceless ruffians but known hired political hooligans with high-sounding titles bestowed on them by their sponsors, but no arrests have been made, save for a few small fish, leaving the architects of violence," he added.

Speaking April 9 at the consecration of a bishop in Chipata, the archbishop said that, with elections this year, the political atmosphere already is highly charged, and the situation was complicated because parliament did not pass a new constitution.

"Unless a miracle happens, we are likely to go to the polls on the amended 1996 constitution. We have not forgotten that, as a result of the clearly inadequate document, there was tension in the nation before, during and after the 2001 and 2006 and the 2008 presidential elections," said Archbishop Mpundu.

The bishops' conference vice president, Bishop Ignatius Chama of Mpika, urged President Rupiah Banda to dialogue with opposition parties to find a solution to the violence that is slowly heating up as the nation moves toward general elections, expected later in the year.

"What we have seen in the recent past should make all of us sit up," said Bishop Chama. He said the Catholic Church will play its part to ensure that Zambia remains a peaceful nation.

Banda, who attended the Mass, said Zambians depended on the church to bring about a peaceful resolution of political differences. He said even institutions and organizations that had a role to play in the facilitation and management of elections would depend on the church for spiritual and moral guidance.

Supporters of the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy have recently engaged in acts of violence in public places as a means to scare and intimidate people, particularly members of opposition parties, into

supporting their presidential and parliamentary candidates during this year's general elections, expected sometime after June.

The supporters, referred to as "MMD cadres" and usually clad in colorful printed fabric bearing Banda's portrait, beat up and insult people who oppose their candidates; often this occurs in full view of politicians and police who are scared to arrest or stop them for fear of being fired.

Recently, the cadres beat up journalists at Lusaka International Airport who were covering Banda's return from a trip abroad. The president, police and army officials stood by, and Banda later held a news conference at which he blamed the journalists for provoking his supporters.

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