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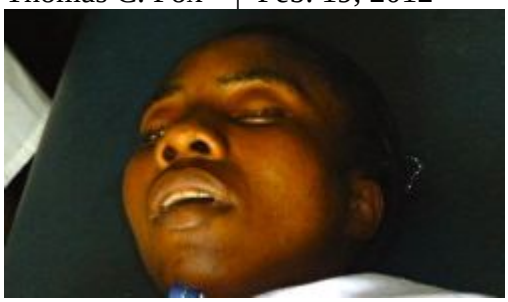
Catholic sister stabbed in the heart in Congo

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 19, 2012



ROME ? A Catholic sister in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has become one of the latest victims to widespread violence in that nation following a disputed presidential election late last year.

Sister of Charity of Jesus and Mary Liliane Mapalayi was stabbed through the heart as she worked in her school office Feb. 2, minutes after students and staff left the school grounds for a lunch break.

The 32-year-old Mapalayi, the school treasurer in a Catholic parish in Western Kasai Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was rushed to a hospital after staff heard a scream and found her bleeding from a knife wound to the chest. She was pronounced dead on arrival.

Press reports say at least two dozen Congolese have lost their lives as violence has escalated in recent weeks, catching innocents in the power struggle between political factions.

One church source said a witness to the Mapalayi murder continues to be missing days after the assault.

Catholics in the Congo have been targeted as the church is a key force in the country. Some 30,000 Catholics monitored the election, widely viewed as fraudulent by the church and international observers.

In January, 35 Congolese bishops issued a scathing report calling the election corrupt and asking for the election committee to resign.

Congolese President Joseph Kabila has been in power since 2001 and was declared the official winner by the government-supported election committee two days after the Nov. 28 election.

Opposition party members, including presidential candidate Etienne Tshisekedi, rejected Kabila's presidential victory. Tshisekedi had declared himself president, though he has been under effective house arrest in the capital of Kinshasa for weeks.

The Democratic Republic Congo is largely Christian with about 50 percent of the population listed as Roman Catholic. It is also one of the world?s least developed nations.

Catholic groups had the largest contingents of observers watching the vote.

The bishops? statement condemned the election, saying the electoral process had brought shame on the country.

They cited ballot-stuffing and a general climate of fear as reasons for the fraudulent election.

The Archbishop of Kinshasa Laurent Monsengwo, the de facto primate of the Congo, had been among those who called for peaceful protests in recent weeks.

In the days leading up to Mapalayi's murder, violence had been spreading and Catholics had been targeted. Opposition groups had called for a march and a strike to protest the election.

Government police used tear gas last week to attack the marchers, beating some protesters and arresting others. There were reports that some marchers fled to a local parish. The march, which was also called to mark the 20th anniversary of the deadly suppression of a Christian pro-democracy protest, had been banned by the government.

It was not immediately clear why Mapalayi and the school at which she worked had been singled out. Some church sources said the attacker might have confused her for the school?s principal, suggesting the attack was intended to send a message to the school not to support the strike or assist protesters.

A religious source in the Congo, in an email to *NCR*, wrote Mapalayi was murdered ?because the cardinal, bishops and the Union of superiors had denounced what has happened during the elections."

The source added: "The government now is against the church. But it is not problem; it is the consequence of being with people. Without this position, our life as Christians makes no sense. We are even happy to die for it.?

Catholic officials in the Congo, working through the local nuncio, have been trying to send word out to the wider world about deteriorating conditions there. Reports about Mapalayi?s death have been circulating for several days on the Internet but have been mostly in French. Only in recent hours has the news entered English news channels.

Speaking to the political situation, a local priest was quoted as saying that government officials had demonstrated ?their persistent inclination to stifle the population's right to express itself.

Their repression was ferocious: they fired tear gas everywhere in the compound, right into the priests' quarters," Fr. Pierre Bosangia, one of the marcher's organizers was quoted as having told Agence France Press from inside a besieged church compound.

He said church workers had gathered information indicating that the security services had detained three priests, two nuns and two protesters.

One witness was quoted as saying police stood idly by when dozens of mainly teenage thugs poured out of two buses and stormed a church compound.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* publisher.]

Editor's note: A full photo of Charity Sr. Liliane Mapalayi has been removed after objections from some readers.

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