

Central African Republic bishops: Christians subject to pillage, rape

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Islamist rebels who have taken over Central African Republic are targeting Christians and their churches, and the population is "living in permanent anguish," said the Catholic bishops' justice and peace commission.

"What abominable acts, what humiliating, degrading and inhuman forms of treatment: Not knowing what to do next, the population is living in permanent anguish, amid fear, pillage, rape, injustice, violence and the settling of scores," the commission said in a May 5 statement signed by its president, Bishop Albert Vanbuel of Kaga-Bandoro.

In a statement that named numerous church workers and buildings attacked, the commission said that, in the early days of May, people had been left scarred and traumatized by gun battles in the capital, Bangui, while rebel alliance members "continue to kill each day."

"Our country has shifted very negatively since the arrival in power of a rebel chief, self-proclaimed as a republic president," the commission said.

It added that the Catholic church nationwide had "paid a heavy price in damage," leaving the dioceses of Kaga-Bandoro, Bambari, Alindao, Bangassou and Bossangoa "seriously shaken up."

"This commission is alarmed at continuing acts of barbarity by Seleka elements, especially when power is held by one on them," the statement said. "This is a rebellion of religious extremism with evil intentions, characterized by profanation and the programmed and planned destruction of religious buildings, especially Catholic and Protestant churches."

The Catholic church's nine dioceses make up around 30 percent of the 4.4 inhabitants of the Central African Republic, one of the world's poorest countries.

The Seleka (Alliance) movement launched an offensive in early December, accusing President Francois Bozize of reneging on promises to share government posts and integrate rebel forces into the national army.

The movement, composed partly of Arab-speaking Islamists, suspended the government, parliament and constitution after seizing Bangui in late March and has been accused of attacking Christian parishes.

The justice and peace commission said a convent of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres had been "pillaged and sacked" at Bossembele, while a parish priest from Kassai, Father Seraphin Zouka, had been robbed "with a dagger in his throat."

It added that the rector of Bangui's Immaculate Conception cathedral, Msgr. Francis Saint Clair Siki, had been abducted April 27, along with the archdiocese chancellor, Msgr. Dieu-Beni Banga.

"Relations are deteriorating daily between the population and elements of Seleka, who feel themselves in

conquered territory," the commission said.

"What do these Seleka elements want? The risk of releasing interfaith conflicts in a spirit of vengeance could provoke a long-term merciless rending of the Central African people at this moment of Gehenna."

The statement follows an early May letter from Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga of Bangui to Seleka leader and self-proclaimed president Michel Djotodia. The archbishop urged him to denounce the violence, initiate disarmament and indemnify the church for "stolen, looted and vandalized properties."

The letter also condemned the rape of women and girls and recruitment of child soldiers by Seleka forces and urged the president to declare "Seleka's true intentions" toward Christians.

Human rights sources said a Catholic church was looted and a tabernacle profaned at Ouango, on the Congolese border, in early May, in an attack that left nine dead. They added that some Muslims had sold objects from churches in their shops, while others had tried to mediate and stop the violence.

In its statement, the justice and peace commission said Mother Lucie Mbombo of the Sisters of Mary Missionary in Bangui had been "pursued and hunted" by rebel troops, while a pregnant Catholic had been killed by rebels in the capital April 27.

It urged the government to "restore constitutional order and hold a national dialogue for reconciliation," as well as stopping all "abductions, arbitrary arrests and summary executions."

"The Central African Republic does not merit the situation it finds itself in," the commission said.

"We count on the responsibility of the country's new authorities and their sense of patriotism to see how this crisis is weakening social cohesion and to bring all perpetrators of crime to justice, with reparation and compensation for victims. It seems Beelzebub, chief of all demons, now inhabits the hearts of certain daughters and sons of this country."

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