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Church peace initiatives said to be vital to easing Kenyan conflicts

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Church initiatives to promote peace among Kenya's Turkana and Pokot communities are vital to easing simmering conflicts over recently discovered oil deposits and continuing tensions over grazing lands and access to water, said the apostolic nuncio to the East Africa nation.

Archbishop Charles Balvo explained in a mid-December email to Catholic News Service that tensions in the communities in northwestern Kenya near the South Sudan border can be reduced if development of natural resources is done "in a manner that benefits as many people as possible, especially the people of the region."

The archbishop's comments followed his presentation days earlier during a Dec. 8-10 peace conference organized by the Lodwar diocese. He told about 70 church leaders, laypeople and political officials from border areas of Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda that the church's efforts can dissuade the two communities from engaging in intertribal conflicts.

"I am of the opinion that the conference is an important contribution of the Catholic Church in this region toward alleviating ethnic tensions and promoting reconciliation and peace," the American-born prelate said.

Violence between the Turkana and Pokot communities has flared over land and natural resources in recent months, fueled by the 2012 announcement of the discovery of oil in the region. The most recent flare-up occurred in November.

At the time, Lodwar Bishop Dominic Kimengich blamed the renewed tensions on the discovery of oil.

Balvo urged conference attendees to strengthen peacemaking efforts, especially as development of the oil reserves and efforts to access aquifers occur.

"Both of these -- oil and water -- discoveries have the potential to bring substantial development to the area but, at the same time, they could also contribute to the intertribal and regional conflicts if they are not properly and wisely developed," Balvo said in his email.

"Given the importance of faith in the lives of the people of this region, the church has a great deal of influence and can make a considerable contribution to the promotion of peace and reconciliation," the archbishop said.

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