

Mali hopes for peace after inauguration of civilian president

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#)

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(ENInews)--A civilian president has been inaugurated in Mali, sending signs of hope for peace among citizens and faith communities in the West African nation where a coup occurred in March.

Dioncounda Traore, 70, was sworn in as interim president on April 12, marking a return to civilian rule in a country where Christians and Muslims had jointly launched an appeal for calm, solidarity and prayers since the coup.

"The return to constitutional order is extremely important," Sheikh Saliou Mbacke, coordinator of Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa, a pan-African organization which brings together the continent's main faith traditions to work for peace. Mbacke, who is based in Senegal, which borders Mali, told ENInews in an interview on 12 April that "dialogue channels should now be opened to restore the country's unity."

But as the leader took office, concerns were being expressed over the actions of separatist Tuareg desert rebels in the north, where reports says churches are being destroyed and Christians forced to flee.

The rebels known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad have taken control of a large part of Mali's north, with support from fighters and weapons from Libya, according to reports. The group has proclaimed independence of the area captured for what they called the state of Azawad. The areas have been marginalized since the former French colony got its independence in 1960.

Important historical and cultural cities of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu are now in the control of the rebels. Reports say an Islamist faction within the rebel movement has imposed Sharia (Islamic law) in the city of Timbuktu.

"Religion is again at the limelight with the crisis in the north. No political movement should use any religion to advance its interests," said Mbacke. "Religious

communities should join efforts to fight against this abuse of religion. They should also call all parties to work for peace and protect civilians in Mali."

Traore, previously the speaker of the national assembly, said he is seeking to defeat the Tuareg rebels and Islamist militants whose uprising led to the military coup on March 22. While President Amadou Toumani Toure was deposed in the coup, the new leader has 40 days to organize an election in the country of 13 million people where 90 per cent are Muslims.

U.N. agencies say more than 200,000 people have fled the north since the beginning of the uprising. An estimated 100,000 refugees have crossed into Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso and need food aid, according to the agencies.

In the city of Gao, the Rev. Edmond Dembel, spokesman of the Episcopal Conference of the Mali Roman Catholic Church said Christians felt threatened and were hiding.

"In Gao, a church was destroyed as well as other property belonging to the local church community," Dembel was quoted in news reports as saying on April 12.

As the crisis deepens in the north, Christians are abandoning areas where some were implementing food relief, healthcare and agriculture projects among the impoverished Tuareg tribe.