

Armed civilians heighten Tripoli danger, cleric says

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Nairobi, Kenya, August 25 (ENInews)--Thousands of small arms and light weapons distributed to civilians by the government in Tripoli are adding to the danger and instability of the city as rebel forces continued to fight soldiers loyal to deposed dictator Moammar Gadhafi, a Libyan cleric has said.

The Rev. Amado Baranquel, a priest at St. Francis Roman Catholic Church, the seat of the Vicariate of Tripoli, said the uncontrolled use of weapons was confining civilians inside their houses and causing extreme fear.

"They are using the guns any way they want. Some are using them for looting," Baranquel told ENInews in a telephone interview on 25 August from Tripoli. "We hope this (fighting) will end soon. Please pray for us."

Churches in Tripoli have closed down indefinitely, following the entry into the city on 21 August of National Transitional Council (NTC) fighters backed by the NATO alliance.

Several armed men entered the Catholic church on 22 August and took hostage the people inside, according to Baranquel. "We raised our both hands. They said they were looking for guns, but when they could not find any, they took away the church's television set. We were not harmed," he said.

The reports that the government was arming civilian supporters in the capital first emerged in February when protests against Gadhafi's 42-year rule began. The government claimed it was building a people's defense against foreign troops.

The church is running out of food, water and other essential supplies, according to Baranquel. Agencies are warning of a looming humanitarian crisis in the city if the situation does not change. In Tripoli, several medical facilities report serious shortages of materials and staff, according to Medecins Sans Frontieres/Doctors without Borders emergency coordinator Jonathan Whittal, who is in the city.

"Some hospitals have run out of life-saving medication and equipment. There is little electricity and insufficient fuel to run ambulances and some crucial equipment," said Whittal in a news release on 25 August. Media reports say more than 400 people have died and over 2000 injured in the battle for Tripoli.

When the rebellion began, some Christian leaders expressed concerns over the future of Christianity in the mainly Islamic country. In the 1969 revolution that brought Gadhafi to power, most church properties were seized. The

Roman Catholic Cathedral of Tripoli was made into a mosque in 1970, while the cathedral in Benghazi was closed down. It was being restructured for a possible conversion into a museum before the rebellion.

"We are free to worship and celebrate mass in our two main two churches here," the Rev. Daniel Farrugia, vicar general of the Vicariate of Tripoli told ENInews in a recent interview.

"We hope we will be free with the new leadership. Churches in Benghazi city (the seat of the rebels) are continuing with no problems. I think we will continue," added Baranguel.

During Gadhafi's reign, Christian churches were barred from carrying conducting religious practices outside the church buildings. Catholics, for example, were prohibited from reciting the rosary in public and distributing Bibles was a criminal offense.