

Libyan Christian leaders stress reconciliation

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ENInews--In Tripoli, fireworks were ignited, guns fired in the air and chants sounded on 17 February in celebrations marking the first anniversary of the Libyan uprising that ended Colonel Moammar Gadhafi's 42-year rule.

But amid the fanfare, Christian leaders emphasized the need for comprehensive reconciliation and sustained peace efforts to end instability in the North African country.

"The people seem much happier as from last October (when Gadhafi was captured). They are more spontaneous, happy and relieved. They are joyful, not withstanding the security situations they are facing, but we still have to keep praying and stressing peace and reconciliation," the Rev. Daniel Farrugia, the vicar general of the Vicariate of Tripoli, told ENInews in a telephone interview.

The first major uprising against Gadhafi's rule started in the town of Benghazi in February last year. The revolt later spread to other parts of the country with the NATO Alliance joining to back rebel fighters grouped under the National Transitional Council.

The alliance conducted airstrikes to implement a U.N.-sanctioned no-fly zone and protect civilians. The action was approved by the U.N. Security Council after Gadhafi's forces attacked civilians protesting his brutal rule.

With the death of the leader on 20 October, global Christian leaders had raised concerns that an Islamist takeover would badly affect Christianity as it had been witnessed in other North African countries and the Middle East.

But Farrugia explained that the Church had survived the war and continues with its work and mission. "It was not very much affected and its members are now returning, especially the Filipinos and African. But the families are yet to return," he said.

According to the Rev. Kosti Ketola, an Anglican leader at the Christ the King Church in Tripoli, church leaders were backing the celebrations in their individual capacities. "The situation is changing and people are slowly coming back to church ... the guns have disappeared from the streets, but the challenge is to minister to the people," said Ketola whose church had been serving an international congregation of Indians, Pakistanis, Egyptians and Nigerians.

Before the war, members of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and some Pentecostal churches accounted for three per cent of the population. The Libyan people, who are mainly moderate Muslims, remained tolerant to the groups during the revolution. The denominations were never asked to close down or evacuate, according to the leaders.

The leaders say they are keen to continue with interfaith dialogue, which is largely credited for the safety of Christian leaders and churches during the war. Under the past regime, an active discussion between the faiths thrived.

The leaders express optimism that the new authority will respect religious freedom. The authority has been trying to establish control of the country, where many small arms and light weapons are still in the hands of militias and the public.

Dr. Nagi Giumma Baraka, a former Minister of Health in the transitional council, said there are more than 200,000 registered fighters and many weapons circulating among them and the public. "For those reasons, no one is obeying the law and the country is lawless for the time being," he said in an opinion in The Tripoli Post on 7 February.

Meanwhile, thousands of people remain in detention, individual lives and communities continued to be threatened by unexploded devices, and many families are still trying to find missing relatives, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.