

Violence against Muslims soars in Central African Republic

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(RNS) African religious leaders are appealing for an end to violence against Muslims in the Central African Republic as thousands flee to neighboring Chad and Cameroon.

In recent weeks, a pro-Christian militia known as anti-Balaka (or anti-machete) has killed and mutilated Muslims as they have tried to leave the capital Bangui by the truckload.

Muslims had enjoyed some protection when Michel Djotodia, the country's first interim Muslim president, was in power. Djotodia resigned under pressure in January and Catherine Samba-Panza was appointed the interim president.

Earlier, Djotodia's Seleka Islamist coalition faced accusations of atrocities against Christians. His departure did not stop revenge attacks.

"We are horrified by these killings in the Central African Republic," said Sheikh Saliou Mbacke, the coordinator of Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa. "We appeal to both groups to cease the attacks and live side by side as they have done for many years."

Mbacke, a Muslim leader from the Muridiya Sufi community of Senegal, said it was disturbing that the violence threatens to expel all Muslims from CAR.

"This is clearly manipulation of religion for some political gains, which must be rejected in Africa," he said.

With the escalating violence, International Criminal Court Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said the plight of civilians in CAR has gone from bad to worse since September 2012. Bensouda announced preliminary investigations by the court based at The Hague for war crimes and crimes against humanity. She said the victims had been deliberately targeted on religious grounds.

The international community must move quickly to find an immediate solution to the violence, or it may become too late, said Sheikh Hamid Byamugenzi, a religious studies lecturer at Uganda's Islamic University.

"I know Muslims in other countries are pronouncing jihad on behalf of their Muslim brothers being massacred in Central Africa. If this is not stopped now, it will spread religious hate and tension across Africa. It will (result in) counterattacks that will be difficult to stop," he observed.

According to Archbishop Nestor Desire Nongo-Aziagbia of Bossangoa, disarming the militia groups has been the biggest challenge. The fighters have failed to surrender the arms, despite an ongoing disarmament program.

Muslims make up 15 percent of CAR's population. Christians comprise 50 percent; the rest are of various native faiths. More than 800,000 people have been displaced in the fighting. According to the United Nations, more than 2,000 have been killed there since March.