

Central African Republic clergy urge faster UN deployment of peace force

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Religious leaders, playing an ever expanding role in the troubled Central African Republic, are urging reinforcements for an existing peace mission, even as the United Nations prepares to roll out a bigger one in September.

On April 10, the UN voted unanimously to deploy 12,000 peacekeepers to the country, where chaos linked to Christian and Islamist militias' revenge attacks is continuing. Already, France has 2,000 soldiers in its former colony, joining 6,000 African Union forces.

In welcoming the UN announcement, African religious leaders urged immediate support for the existing mission to prevent the country from sliding further into chaos.

"As the force will only be deployed by September at the earliest, we urge that strong and immediate support be given in order to improve security at this crucial time," said Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga of Bangui in a joint pre-Easter statement with Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, the CAR's most senior Muslim leader, and Nicolas Guerekoyame Gbangou, president of the Evangelical Alliance.

That trio of religious leaders in the CAR were described as the driving force behind a historic agreement of principles on April 8. The Platform of Religious Leaders calls for intercommunal and interfaith dialogue between the key parties to the violent conflict.

Over 2,000 people have died in the violence since December, and 2 million others are in need of humanitarian aid.

A delegation of religious leaders from the United States was present to sign as witnesses to the agreements, according to William F. Vendley, secretary general of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, whose office is at UN headquarters.

The American delegation included Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, archbishop emeritus of Washington, D.C.; Leith Anderson, president of the National Association

of Evangelicals; and Imam Mohamed Magid, president of the Islamic Society of North America.

The church remains the only functioning body, Archbishop Samuel Kleda of Douala, Cameroon, told Fides news agency after visiting the CAR in April.

“The state no longer exists,” said Kleda. “The only institution that is functioning is the Catholic Church. Actually, the displaced are living in Catholic parishes.”

Bossangoa bishop Nestor-Désiré Nongo-Aziagbia said the lack of clear leadership and the behavior of some leaders in neighboring Chad were complicating matters. He claimed Chad is dividing the CAR by creating a protectorate in the north to resettle fleeing Muslims. —RNS/added sources