

Protestant groups ask African Union to step into Zimbabwe crisis: Ever-worsening government suppression

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Two global groupings of Protestant churches have urged the African Union to intervene in the crisis in Zimbabwe, where President Robert Mugabe's government has cracked down on opposition protests as the country faces economic collapse.

Acting separately late last month, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches—umbrella groups with a combined 140 million members in their constituent churches—deplored ever-worsening government suppression of dissent and the suffering of people in the southern African nation.

The main governing body of the Lutheran World Federation, meeting in Sweden, called on the international community to respond to the distress in Zimbabwe and “to act to restore hope, and to promote peace.”

The LWF Council gave unanimous backing to a call by LWF general secretary Ishmael Noko, a Zimbabwean theologian, for the AU to take a stronger role in the southern African country. Noko had accused Mugabe's government of responding with “unprecedented brutality and oppression” to calls for political change.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which has 75 million members in 216 national churches, also urged action by the pan-African body, saying that dissenters in Zimbabwe were being intimidated.

“The latest phase of violence and intimidation includes the arrest and beating of opposition politicians,” said Setri Nyomi, WARC general secretary, in a March 27 letter to Ghanaian president John Agyekum Kufuor, who currently chairs the African Union.

Zimbabweans are struggling to survive in a country said to have an inflation rate of more than 1,700 percent and widespread unemployment and poverty. Mugabe, in

power since independence in 1980, has resisted calls for political reforms.

On March 11, security forces beat up scores of opposition, church and rights activists attending a prayer rally. Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, went to the hospital with head and facial injuries, while an MDC activist was fatally shot as the meeting was dispersed.

“The use of violence by government and security forces is unacceptable under any circumstances,” said Nyomi, a member of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana. “It is especially disturbing when it is used against people simply wanting to pray for a better country or when they simply wish to express themselves.”

The Lutheran governing body expressed strong support for an initiative taken by churches and related organizations in Zimbabwe to open a space for national dialogue about the crisis, the Ecumenical Peace Initiative in Zimbabwe. -*Ecumenical News International*