

Church leaders plead for peace in Kenyan turmoil: Kobia, Tutu and others

News in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

Religious leaders are condemning postelection violence in Kenya that some observers say evokes memories of ethnic violence in Rwanda almost 14 years ago.

An Assemblies of God church in western Kenya was targeted January 1, and at least 30 people were killed after it was set aflame by an angry mob following disputed presidential elections, held December 27.

“Now is the time to put the interests of the nation and the surrounding region above other concerns,” Samuel Kobia, the general secretary of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, said in a statement that also called upon Kenyan churches “to do their part in pursuing the common good of their communities and country.”

Kobia, a Kenyan Methodist, said churches need to play such a role “amid ominous signs of ethnically targeted hatred and violence. Homes, businesses, public buildings and places of worship must remain safe.”

The violence has resulted in more than 300 deaths and has caused the displacement of as many as 100,000. Abbas Gullet, the secretary general of the Kenya Red Cross, in remarks to the London-based *Guardian* newspaper, characterized the situation as a “national disaster” and predicted that several hundred thousand will require humanitarian assistance “for some time.”

The turmoil stems from election results that opposition leader Raila Odinga claims were fraudulent. In turn, the incumbent government of Mwai Kibaki has claimed that Odinga’s supporters have been guilty of “ethnic cleansing,” the BBC reported. The Luo tribe’s Odinga, meanwhile, has said that Kibaki supporters are “guilty, directly, of genocide.”

Kibaki is a member of the Kikuyu tribe, an ethnic group that has long dominated Kenyan politics. Those who perished in the church were reportedly Kikuyus seeking refuge from violence.

In a separate appeal Geneva-based Setri Nyomi, a native of Ghana and the general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, urged Presbyterian leaders in Kenya to forgo partisan allegiances.

Nyomi said the church “is called upon again to rise above any attempts to be drawn into the polarization by standing firmly for peace and justice and the protection of life and property in this period of determining the political future of the country,” according to Ecumenical News International.

In addition, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu arrived in Kenya on January 3 to assist in a church-backed bid aimed at stemming the violence. “I appeal to both leaders to meet and talk about points of disagreement,” said Tutu on his arrival from South Africa.

Tutu said he was responding to a request by Mvume Dandala, former presiding bishop of South Africa’s Methodist Church and now general secretary of the Nairobi-based All Africa Conference of Churches, who is among church leaders seeking to play a peacemaking role.