

War-torn churches shelter Muslims in Central African Republic

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(RNS) Churches in Central African Republic are caring for thousands of Muslims who have been trapped in a cycle of revenge attacks, perpetrated by a pro-Christian militia.

Since December, Anti-Balaka militias have been emptying Muslim quarters and avenging earlier attacks by the Seleka, an Islamist militia. The Seleka rampaged through the country in early 2013, terrorizing Christians and ransacking churches, hospitals and shops.

Now that the Muslim president Michel Djotodia has stepped down, Seleka is being forced to withdraw from its strongholds, as the center of power shifts, amid a mass exodus and displacement of Muslims.

In Baoro, a town in the northwest, a Roman Catholic parish is caring for more than 2,000 Muslims who can't flee. A group of Catholic sisters in the town of Bossemptele is sheltering more than 500 Muslims, providing food, water and medicine.

"Now is the time for [people] of good will to stand up and prove the strength and quality of their faith," the Rev. Xavier Fagba, a priest in Baoro, told the BBC.

One reason Muslims are able to take shelter in churches is because the country's religious leaders believe this is a nonreligious conflict, said the Rev. Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbango, president of the Alliance of Evangelical Churches in the Central African Republic.

"We have been traveling to the provinces telling people to understand this is not a religious conflict," said Guerekoyame-Gbango. "This is contributing some tolerance,

although many people, including Christians, have taken up arms. This is regrettable.”

Roman Catholic Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga of the Bangui Archdiocese has welcomed Imam Omar Kobine Layama, president of the country’s Islamic Community, to live with him in the church compound.

“I live alongside him and I ask Christians to do likewise,” Nzapalainga said in a statement Tuesday (Feb. 18) for Caritas, the international relief organization. “Love should be a characteristic of Christians. You can’t call yourself a Christian if you kill your brother. You can’t call yourself a Christian when you hunt him down.”

Last week, CAR interim President Catherine Samba-Panza said she was “going to war” with the Anti-Balaka, who she described as having replaced a “sense of their mission” with warfare and killings.