

Religious leaders express hopes for CAR peace deal

Churches and mosques have been caught in the middle of violence in the Central African Republic, where militias have frequently fought over mineral resources.

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue

The government of the Central African Republic and 14 rebel groups signed a peace agreement February 6, raising hopes for an end to a complex conflict that has provoked interreligious strife.

In CAR, armed militias control 80 percent of the country and frequently fight over mineral resources, which include gold, diamonds, and uranium.

The majority-Christian country plunged into violence in 2013, when a coalition of rebels known as Séléka overthrew the government of François Bozizé, a Christian, and installed Michel Djotodia, who is Muslim, as president.

That triggered the formation of a counter militia known as Anti-balaka that called itself pro-Christian. Djotodia resigned in 2014 under international pressure, but Séléka factions and Anti-balaka militias continued to engage in revenge attacks.

Thousands died in the violence and an estimated 4.5 million people have been displaced.

The government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and the rebel factions held the first-ever direct peace talks in Khartoum, Sudan, in late January.

“The first effect of this agreement is the cessation of all violence against civilians,” Touadéra said after the signing.

Religious leaders hope the latest peace deal will bring an end to attacks on churches and mosques. Yet some are remaining cautious after seven past disappointments.

The Catholic Church helped broker the last agreement in 2017, which ended in less than a day, with hundreds killed.

“I cannot tell anything now, but anything that promises to bring peace for the people is welcome,” said Roman Catholic archbishop Nestor Desire Nongo-Aziagbia, the vice president of the Central African bishops conference.

Although peace agreement details have not been made public, reports indicate that the groups agreed on key issues, including amnesty for militia fighters. That had been a sticking point, with the government reluctant to grant amnesty, instead leaning toward prosecuting militia fighters for war crimes.

In the cycle of violence, churches have come under attack from both sides, with [a number of pastors being killed](#). Monasteries have also been targeted, with nuns attacked and robbed by gangs. Scores of mosques have also been burned.

Two Catholic priests and a Protestant pastor died at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Alindao in November, the site of one of the deadliest attacks on a church mission with a death toll of 80, according to church leaders.

“The attacks can be seen as an attempt to silence the church, which continues to stand for the truth,” Nongo-Aziagbia said.

Francis Kuria Kagema, general secretary of the African Council of Religious Leaders, said his organization will work to build peace between faith groups and foster religious harmony, which was fractured during the war.

“We urge the government to facilitate the safe return of all refugees and work with the warring groups to re-create the society in Central African Republic,” he said.
—Religion News Service

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