

Sierra Leones First Catholic University Scheduled to Open Next Year

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- In an area of Sierra Leone hit hard by years of civil war, government officials have approved plans to open the University of Makeni, the country's first Catholic university, in January.

Located in the northern city of Makeni, the university will replace the Fatima Institute, a 5-year-old school focused mainly on sociology, law and religion, with a larger institution and broader learning options.

"One good thing from the war is that everyone wants education," Bishop George Biguzzi of Makeni told staffers at the U.S. bishops' headquarters in Washington.

The bishop visited the offices Aug. 31 to discuss the state of Sierra Leone during and after the war. He also visited Jacklyne Kamara, who left Sierra Leone with her siblings years ago and now works as a placement specialist with the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services.

Bishop Biguzzi said the country is at peace now, but a decade ago it was not safe for citizens to leave their homes after 5 p.m. He recalled multiple personal attacks as well as the violence of amputations and the plight of child soldiers during the country's 1991-2002 civil war. He said the conflicts were not a result of religious persecution or tribal disagreements, but a complete collapse of the government. At times, he said, "a check was just a piece of paper," not worth any money.

Bishop Biguzzi said that even now he is worried about the stability of the country because of the global recession. Although government officials say the country has reduced its financial dependence on other countries by 10 percent, Sierra Leone's economy is still receiving 60 percent of its funding from international sources. Unemployment is rampant throughout the country, Bishop Biguzzi said, and many teachers have threatened to go on strike because of inadequate wages.

He acknowledged that living conditions in Sierra Leone can be harsh and said the country is having a problem keeping educated citizens from opting to live in Europe or North America. Fewer than 80 doctors remain to keep the country of 5.5 million people healthy, he said.

The new university will target some of these issues and work to provide more engineering courses, Bishop Biguzzi said, especially with help from a group of Indian nuns who will teach in the new school. Some classes will be available through the university's radio station, he said.

Awareness Times, a Sierra Leone newspaper, reported the school will use many of the Fatima Institute's current structures, but Catholic missionary orders plan to start building 200 new living quarters early next year.

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