



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Kenya February 2008

We wish to make a passionate appeal to all Kenyans, men and women, old and young, from all political parties, and from all walks of life, to refrain from violence and from the senseless killing of our brothers and sisters! ... We appeal specifically to the political leaders ... to reach out to one another through dialogue in order to seed a solution to the present situation. This country needs peace that is based on justice and true brotherhood.

--Kenya Episcopal Conference, January 2, 2008

BACKGROUND

When the results of the December 27, 2007 Presidential elections were announced giving incumbent President Mwai Kibaki the victory, violence broke out in Kenya. The unrest has been widespread, but concentrated most in the capital of Nairobi and in the western provinces of Kenya. The civil unrest has severe implications for Kenya and for the surrounding region. As of February 8, over 1,000 people have died and about 300,000 people have lost their homes and have taken shelter in various makeshift camps in and outside of Kenya. The economy of Kenya, a vibrant engine of growth in the region, has been crippled with huge losses registered in the tourist industry and in the export of agricultural commodities like flowers, coffee, and tea. The violence and numerous informal roadblocks have hampered the transport of goods and emergency assistance within the country, as well as vital commodities and fuel to neighboring countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Southern Sudan and Eastern Congo. The violence has closed schools, universities and health institutions, either because students and patients cannot travel to them, or because staff have been threatened and have left their posts. Not surprisingly, the poor suffer the most. Many have lost their homes, possessions and livelihoods. While the local Church, CRS and others are currently delivering aid, the future is uncertain for these people in need.

The initial spark to the violence was a very hotly contested election. The election was well run compared to past elections with record levels of voter registration and a 70% voter turn out. There were incidents of blatant appeals to ethnic loyalty, especially in the local language press. The electoral process, however, broke down entirely at the very end. International and national electoral observers, the press and opposition parties raised serious concerns about the tallying of country-wide votes in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Other objections were raised about election fraud, intimidation of voters and other irregularities on both sides. When the Electoral Commission of Kenya declared the victory of incumbent Mwai Kibaki, objections turned to violence.

There are a number of deeper, historical causes for the eruption of violence. Past elections have been flawed, marked by fraud and incidents of unrest and bloodshed. The political rivalries between the Orange Democratic Movement and the ruling Party of National Unity have been intense and fractious. Agreements between the leaders on greater political collaboration have broken down and frustrated expectations for change. Since independence, political participation of all groups and access to the presidency and the parliament have been sources of frustration. The high concentration of political power in the president's office to the detriment of the legislative and judiciary branches also limits political participation and influence on the political process.

Land tenure and disputes over land ownership have divided Kenyan society along ethnic group lines since independence. Land tenure is a particularly important issue in the Rift Valley where farms produce much of the tea, coffee and other export crops that earn Kenya large amounts of foreign exchange. Previous governments have neglected and politicized land reform and thus the issue and the grievances arising from it grow

sharply at election time. Linked to land tenure is a longstanding call by some parties to devolve more decision making power to the provincial governments which would increase the autonomy of local leaders to further local interests. The political parties disagree strongly on this issue.

These problems are often aggravated and deepened when some political leaders paint the conflict in stark terms as one of ethnic group rivalry, or “haves versus have nots.” In addition, several leaders focus on the poor, the unemployed and young people where frustrations are high, making it easy to mobilize them with false promises and to encourage an ethnic reaction to perceived political and economic injustices.

On January 2, a few days after the election, the Kenya Episcopal Conference (KEC) wrote a letter to the people of Kenya, “My Peace I Give You.” The Bishops called for a halt to all violence, for an audit of the election tallying process and for immediate mediation talks between the two political leaders. Only a week later, the Bishops met and issued a second letter, “Call for Prayer for the Success of Dialogue,” in which they supported the efforts of Africa Union President John Kufuor to broker peace in Kenya. They called on the incumbent, Mwai Kibaki, and the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, to negotiate an agreement in good faith that would stop the fighting and bring peace and reconciliation to the country. In response to the fighting in the western part of the country, the Bishops asked the leaders to work towards land reform to redress past injustices. The John Kufuor talks, along with those attempted by Bishop Desmond Tutu, failed to bring the two leaders to the negotiating table. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan arrived in Nairobi at the end of January and finally succeeded in bringing Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga together. Their meetings have been long and difficult, but the leaders seem to be moving towards an agreement.

USCCB POSITION

Immediately after receiving the KEC’s first letter, Bishop Thomas Wenski sent a letter of support to the KEC that congratulated them for their stance and expressed the solidarity and prayers of the American bishops. Bishop Wenski also sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. It echoed the sentiments of the Bishops of Kenya and urged the United States Government to heed the calls of the Church leaders.

Catholic Relief Services, which has maintained a program in Kenya for decades, is actively supporting the Church in Kenya with relief supplies and funding to aid the victims of the violence. CRS is one of the leading providers of assistance in this crisis and is working hand in hand with the Church. Other international Caritas partners have also offered aid. CRS also is supporting the KEC in peace and reconciliation efforts.

ACTION REQUESTED

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is following the events in Kenya with great concern and is working with the U.S. government to encourage a just and sustainable peace to Kenya, to help the Kenyan government and civil society leaders redress long standing grievances and to promote reconciliation among the people of Kenya. More specifically, the USCCB recommends that the U.S. government:

- use its influence with Kenyan political leaders to encourage and pressure them to sustain negotiations and reach viable agreements that will end the political crisis and the fighting as soon as possible;
- lend appropriate mediation services to the UN peace efforts and support other complementary mediation efforts by the African Union, the European Union and others;
- provide adequate funds for humanitarian aid to Kenyans suffering from the violence in addition to sustaining development programs and HIV-AIDS prevention and treatment initiatives; and
- extend long term financial assistance to Kenyan civil society and religious leaders to help them rebuild peace and reconciliation among the people of Kenya.

For more information: Contact Stephen R. Hilbert, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3149 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), Shilbert@usccb.org. See related USCCB documents at this website: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/knyftpg.shtml>.