

Crux now

Congolese bishops call for special court to try war crimes

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A Congolese woman is pictured in a file photo in Goma. Congolese bishops are calling for the establishment of a special criminal court to try those responsible for massive violations of human rights, including the rape of thousands of women. (Credit: Father Peter Balleis/Jesuit Refugee Service via CNS.)

NAIROBI, Kenya — Catholic bishops in Congo are calling for a special international criminal court to try people suspected of mass killings and human rights abuses in the African country, where thousands of women and girls have been raped by armed men.

The bishops made the call in a statement released Oct. 19 after their plenary meeting in the capital, Kinshasa. Their voices joined those of local and international human rights groups, which have been demanding an international criminal tribunal to try the crimes against humanity and to help end impunity. “We demand the government makes a formal request for the establishment of a special criminal court to initiate proceedings against those — both external and internal — presumed responsible for the death of thousands and massive violation of human rights,” said Father Donatien Nshole, secretary-general of the Congolese bishops’ conference. The bishops’ statement urged people not to let their sovereignty be stolen.

The clerics want the court to focus on the 2010 U.N. Mapping Report, which detailed the mass killings, rapes and displacement in the country. The report findings indicated that from 1993 to 2003, more than 600 war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes of genocide were committed in the country.

The perpetrators were 21 armed groups and eight foreign armies, militaries that make frequent incursions into the mineral-rich country or have a presence there by proxy. According to news reports, top politicians and military generals from Rwanda, Uganda and Congo are named in the mapping report.

Nshole noted “there are border conflicts with regular armies from almost all neighboring countries making incursions” into Congo and occupying village and

cities. He also highlighted continuing massacres of local populations in regions, the occupation of land and control of natural resources.

In Congo, priests, nuns and thousands of ordinary faithful have died. Bishops Dieudonne Uringi Uuci of Bunia and Sebastien Muyengo Mulombe of Uvira have received death threats.

“Strengthened by our emotional and effective collegiality, we denounce and vigorously condemn the death threats made against our brothers in the episcopate,” said Nshole. “Conscious of their prophetic mission, they only exercised their ministry as pastors concerned with the well-being and peaceful coexistence of the people entrusted to their pastoral care.”

At the same time, the bishops warn the country is on the verge of bankruptcy, amid an increase in poverty and unemployment, as internal quarrels among the members of the ruling coalition trigger a political crisis in which some politicians have blocked the functioning of the state.

“The paralysis of the coalition affects and infects all sectors of national life,” the bishops warned in the statement, which also addressed chronic insecurity, the crippling divisions within the ruling coalition and continuing misery made worse by the coronavirus pandemic.

The bishops said the country’s economy could be revived by the mining, but the sector is plagued by challenges such as corruption, which only benefits a few individuals, multinationals and militarized criminal groups.

In places where the militias and armed groups proliferate, the state presence is either very weak or missing, according to church officials.

One such area is Beni, where an Islamist militia, Allied Democratic Forces, allegedly attacked a prison, freeing 1,300 prisoners Oct. 20.

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