

Church Shelled, 7 Christians Killed in Central African Republic

A weekend of violence in the Central African Republic included three artillery shells that crashed into a church and killed seven people, according to a pastor.

At least 20 people were reported dead after gun battles in sectors of Bangui, capital of the republic, where an alliance of rebel groups took power last month. Seven of the victims were attending services in the Evangelical Federation of Brothers church on Sunday.

“Two shells landed on the church building and another one landed in the church yard,” Rev. Mbaye-Bondoi told Watch World Monitor in a telephone interview.

“Many children account among wounded persons and were transferred at the pediatric hospital for treatments,” he said. The pastor, who also is the general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance in Central African Republic, was hurt in his right ear but said the injury is not life-threatening.

Various independent news reports said clashes erupted Saturday after members of the rebel forces known as Séléka began a sweep through parts of Bangui to round up weapons. The Chinese news agency Xinhua, citing an unnamed source within the recently formed National Transition Council, said the weapons had been handed out by the ousted Central African Republican president, François Bozizé.

Reports by witnesses and local media say small- and heavy-arms fire ripped through Boy-Rabe, an area considered supportive of the deposed president. Reported death tolls, some citing the local Red Cross, ranged from 13 to more than 20.

Three shells launched by Séléka forces from Boy-Rabe landed in the neighbouring Cité Jean 23 area and hit the Evangelical Federation of Brothers. Most of the churches located in Boy-Rabe and Cité Jean 23, the two most affected areas, were closed Sunday, and many residents have fled to more secure areas of the capital.

There's no official confirmation whether the church was targeted or simply caught in the crossfire, but since the Séléka coalition formed in December, elements have attacked Christian clerics and laypeople, as well as their homes and churches.

Several rebel groups, unhappy with the Bozizé government, joined forces in December under the Séléka banner and within weeks had taken control of much of the country's north, northeast and central regions.

Since Séléka took power on March 24, looting continues in Bangui, despite some attempts by new authorities to restore order.

"Our security is not guaranteed. As long as rebel fighters will stay in the city, insecurity will persist," Mbaye-Bondoi said from an undisclosed location, where he is receiving care.

A BBC report said insecurity is amplified by a huge number of weapons circulating in the city. Also, local residents, particularly the youth, are exasperated by the looting.

Many of those injured during the weekend violence were admitted to the Bangui's Community Hospital, and some of them are lying on the floor, observed a reporter with a private Ndeke-Luka radio station who had visited the centre.

The recent incidents come a day after the rebel leader Michel Djotodia was elected interim president of the Central African Republic by the National Transitional Council, the acting parliament formed of 105 members.

Djotodia has pledged not to run in the presidential election in 2016.