

Female Church Workers Raped, Killed in South Sudan

Scores of female church workers were massacred last month as they sought refuge at a church in the central South Sudanese town of Bor.

The women, several of whom were elderly, had fled rebel attacks to hide in the St. Andrew's Episcopal Church compound, when rebels descended on them, raping several of them before shooting them at close range.

"The women were from different parishes in the diocese and had converged in the church compound when they were killed," the Anglican Bishop of Bor, Ruben Akurdit Ngong, told World Watch Monitor by telephone from Bor. "This is very painful. They destroyed most of the churches in the diocese, but God is with us."

Five of the women—Dorcas Abuol Bouny and Akut Mayem Yar, both 72, Tabitha Akuang, 60, and Mary Alek Akech and Martha Agok Mabior, both 70—worked as pastors in the church. A prominent lay leader, Agel Mabior, 72, was also killed.

"They were all clergy. They all worked at the church. They did different jobs, [including] Bible reading," South Sudanese Anglican Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul told local reporters.

South Sudan has been in turmoil since Dec. 15, when a dispute within the army sparked fierce fighting in the capital city, Juba. Fighting spread quickly across the country and soon took on an ethnic dimension after President Salva Kiir alleged that his former vice president, Riek Machar, was planning a coup. The fighting has pitted army forces loyal to President Kiir, who is a member of the Dinka tribe, against rebel forces aligned to Machar, a member of the Nuer tribe.

The Dinka tribe is the largest in South Sudan; the Nuer is the second largest and boasts a deadly tribal militia known as the "White Army" because its fighters rub white ash, extracted from burnt cow dung, over their bodies. The White Army's main role in the community historically has been to raid cattle and protect the community, but recently it has transformed into a militia used for political gain.

The White Army is suspected to have carried out the massacre of the women and more than 2,500 others in Bor, a largely Dinka town.

"I believe the White Army attacked and killed the women hiding in the church compound. It is very disturbing to know they were abused before being killed," the Rev. Mark Akec-Cien, deputy general secretary of the South Sudan Council of Churches, told World Watch Monitor by telephone. "I don't think they were killed because they are Christians. The militia had also attacked, looted and destroyed shops, businesses, homes and other churches."

Since the conflict erupted, several churches have been attacked and looted, and pastors harassed, according to Akec-Cien. In Malakal, in the north of the country, the St. Francis Catholic Church compound was attacked and looted in mid-January, and the priest robbed. The local Anglican and Evangelical churches were also looted.

The most affected areas are the northeastern states of Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile. Bor, the headquarters of Jonglei State, was totally destroyed, with houses, food stores, shops, banks and churches burnt down and looted, according to the Episcopal Church of Sudan.

The United Nations said on Wednesday that up to 7 million people, nearly two-thirds of the country's population, were at risk of some level of food insecurity, with 3.7 million facing emergency or acute levels. About 900,000 people have fled

their homes since December.

Although the conflict is largely viewed in ethic terms, church leaders have called for peace and reconciliation, and stressed that the roots of the crisis are political. Both the army and rebel forces have been accused of abuses.