

Zimbabwe crisis: 'nothing left to do but pray'

By Santosh Beharie Basildon Peta and Reuters

Durban's cardinal Wilfred Napier, President of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, has criticised President Thabo Mbeki's "quiet diplomacy" approach on the dire situation in Zimbabwe.

So doubtful is the Catholic archbishop that politicians, especially Mbeki, can do anything to ease the plight of millions of starving Zimbabweans, that he believes the only thing left to do is to "get down on our knees and pray for them".

Since heading a South African Council of Churches delegation in July to assess the scale of the humanitarian crisis caused by "Operation Murambatsvina" in Zimbabwe, Napier and other clerics have met twice with Mbeki, urging him to intervene.

"The ordinary people of Zimbabwe that we met with urged us to request our government's intervention in their country. But having met with President Mbeki twice since then does not seem to have made a difference," said Napier on Friday.

The potential for mass starvation in Zimbabwe was now so real and close that Napier and Archbishop Pius Ncube of Bulawayo have both separately called on the United Nations Security Council to take responsibility for the crisis and act immediately.

"I certainly think that now is the time for the UN to intervene. (UN secretary general) Kofi Annan recently said that if the UN did not intervene in the quake-ravaged Pakistan, they would have blood on their hands. We can draw a parallel for the crisis in Zimbabwe if the UN does not intervene there immediately.

"The UN has a right to do so and should invoke that right. The sovereignty of Zimbabwe has to be superseded if millions of its people are starving and the government there is doing nothing about it," said Napier.

Napier said during a two-week visit to Australia in September that clerics, government officials and citizens of that country expressed concern that southern African leaders failed to intervene in Zimbabwe.

"We repeated what the people of Zimbabwe requested of us - to pray for them, to help them with food and other aid, to get our government to mediate with the Zimbabwean government and to never make them feel as if they are alone. We have already launched a prayer campaign for the people of Zimbabwe," said Napier.

"I cannot see politicians sorting out the problems in Zimbabwe. Therefore we have to get down on our knees and pray for them," he said.

Napier and Ncube recently stressed that if the UN did not respond quickly and decisively to ensure that food aid comes to the country and was distributed fairly to all communities without political interference, the organisation would become complicit in the rapidly unfolding humanitarian disaster.

Napier also recently joined other regional church leaders in branding the Mugabe regime guilty of a crime against humanity in relation to the politicisation of food.

Under the guise of restoring order, the government's controversial operation to "Drive Out the Filth" destroyed the homes or jobs of at least 700 000 people and the lives of 2.4 million others, affecting almost a fifth of the population - currently estimated at 11 million.

The informal economy, which fed 40% of the people, was wrecked. The International Crisis Group estimates that Zimbabwe's internal refugee problem is between four and five million.

A further 3.5 million people are estimated to have fled the country, mainly to countries within the Southern African

Development Community, notably South Africa.

Archbishop Ncube said on Wednesday he feared 200 000 of his countrymen could die by early next year because of food shortages he blamed on his government, and called for Mugabe's ousting.

Ncube, a frequent and outspoken critic of Mugabe, spoke at a news conference called to show a new film on "Operation Murambatsvina".

"I think Mugabe should just be banished, like what happened to Charles Taylor. He should just be banished from Zimbabwe," said Ncube, referring to the former Liberian president forced into exile in Nigeria.

"Let the man get banished if you don't want Zimbabweans to die," said Ncube, responding to questions about what the international community could do to help Zimbabwe.

Ncube said 700 people a day were already dying of Aids in Zimbabwe and that the rate of deaths would increase with malnutrition. There is nothing the Zimbabwean people can do, said Ncube. The state security apparatus is everywhere.

"In Zimbabwe, police even spy on each other," said Ncube, adding that the people cannot help themselves, cannot speak out, cannot take to the streets.

"We are dealing here with a force of evil that is beyond your imagination," said Ncube.

Meanwhile, Mbeki talked this week to two warring factions in Zimbabwe's main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to try to prevent it disintegrating but he appeared to have failed.

The party, which came close to defeating Mugabe's ruling ZanuPF in its first election challenge in June 2000, has since then been battered by him into steady retreat at the polls.

Now it is about to split between those who wish to continue parliamentary politics and those led by MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai who want instead to challenge Mugabe on the streets.

On Thursday night Mbeki met the parliamentary faction led by party deputy president Gibson Sibanda, which rebelled against Tsvangirai because he overturned a narrow vote in the MDC's 66 member national executive committee in favour of participating in elections for a new senate next month.

However, Tsvangirai said yesterday his party had backed his controversial decision to boycott next month's senate polls. But a top-ranking party official said local groups might not fall into line.

Tsvangirai's spokesman William Bango said although some officials opposing Tsvangirai's stance had not attended a meeting on Saturday, the meeting had a quorum.

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