

## RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

# A truce for the covid. From the pandemic an opportunity for peace?

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## 1. *A persuasive appeal*

The pandemic has not spared the lands in war, where “worst is yet to come”. For this reason, the General Secretary of the United Nations Organization Antonio Guterres re-launched on April 3rd 2020 his appeal for a global ceasefire,<sup>1</sup> which received support from many religious leaders, including Pope Francis. “There should be only one fight in our world today, our shared battle against Covid 19”, added Guterres. In the appeal of March 23<sup>rd</sup> he had used similar explicit, direct and effective expressions. He recalled that “the virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity, faction or faith because it attacks all, relentlessly”.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, “women and children, people with disabilities, the marginalized and the displaced pay the highest price”.<sup>3</sup> In summary, therefore, “the fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war”.

Guterres had therefore called for an “immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world to help create corridors for life-saving aid. To open precious windows for diplomacy. To bring hope to places among the most vulnerable to Covid 19”.

Six days later, Pope Francis, in the speech delivered at the end of the Angelus prayer, had promptly associated himself with the appeal, inviting “everyone to follow it”.<sup>4</sup> And he had added:

May our joint fight against the pandemic bring everyone to recognize the great need to reinforce brotherly and sisterly bonds as members of a single human family. In particular, may it inspire a renewed commitment to overcome rivalries among the leaders of nations and the parties involved. Conflicts cannot be resolved through

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sghsm20032.doc.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sghsm20018.doc.htm>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>4</sup> See [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus)

## RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

war! Antagonism and differences must be overcome through dialogue and a constructive search for peace.<sup>5</sup>

These pages focus on some scenarios of sub-Saharan Africa, the continent where most of the wars currently taking place on the planet are fought. I will try to illustrate the effects of the Guterres-Bergoglio appeal in local situations, effects obtained thanks to the commitment of Catholics, and I will try to understand if this has led to a turning point for pacification and a decrease of violence. Such initiatives undoubtedly belong to Catholics, from hierarchy to associations, to the faithful, and the commitment to restore peace must be a priority concern for Christians.

Pope Francis has reiterated this on several occasions, and he himself has given an example through his action for peace in the Central African Republic and in South Sudan. The current pope also asked that the commitment to peace always have an ecumenical and possibly interreligious character, that is, Catholics could involve other confessions and other religions in the work for reconciliation. There is a long lasting tradition that has to be remembered. Such as the recent involvement of bishops and episcopal conferences in the democratization and pacification processes in Africa, started in the late 1980s.<sup>6</sup> The apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus* (2011), at the end of the second Synod for Africa in 2009, is also significantly explicit, with the subtitle *On the Church in Africa in service to reconciliation, justice and peace*.

The appeal also seemed to be a way of not allowing the realities of wars currently underway to slide further into oblivion, especially the ones that are more distant, gangrenous and of "low intensity", in an era in which almost all media and public opinion attentions and concerns are focused on the trend of the pandemic, and on the economic consequences of it.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>6</sup> In Burundi, Rwanda and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the bishops' conferences have been involved in the reconciliation and forgiveness process among the population. In Zimbabwe, a bishop mediated the dialogue between the government and the opposition in the economic crisis. The cases of Swaziland, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Cameroon, Angola, Guinea Bissau, Sudan, Kenya, Zambia could also be mentioned. In Malawi, the entire process of opposition to President Kamuzu Banda's regime originated with the 1992 Lenten catechesis of Catholic bishops. A Mozambican bishop mediator in the peace process in his country said in 2003: "There is growing awareness in Africa that the Church must be an expert in resolving armed conflicts. We must intensify this awareness with the formation of the civil awareness of citizens". On the role of an independent peacemaker of Christian origin such as the Community of Sant'Egidio see R. Morozzo della Rocca (ed.), *Fare pace. La diplomazia di Sant'Egidio*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Mi) 2018.

## RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

### 2. *At war for language. The Cameroon case*

The case of Cameroon helps to understand the intertwining of conflict and pandemic. For three years a civil war has been blooding the English-speaking regions in the southwest of the country. Outpatient clinics were few before the war. But many health centers have been closed, due to military attacks and to the escape of doctors. Today, people do not know where to turn if the symptoms of the infection occur, or if they get sick of any other pathology. It is estimated that at least one million Cameroonians have been forced to abandon cities and villages, and most of them have taken refuge in the forests. When the government decided to suspend humanitarian and commercial flights, due to the Covid emergency, supplies for humanitarian organizations could no longer be shipped, and the emergency has become more serious.

Guterres' appeal obtained the accession of Southern Cameroon Defense Forces (Scdf), but not of the others armed movements in the area - there are fifteen in all! -. One of these movements, an important one, the Ambazonia Governing Council, said a ceasefire would pave the way for government troop raids. The bishops did not stand by. Since the beginning of the hostilities, they have intervened in various ways. In these pandemic times, as early as February 2020, in an open letter addressed to the President of Cameroon Paul Biya, sixteen bishops from ten countries called for “a lasting solution to Cameroon’s problems through a mediated process that includes Anglophone armed-separatist groups and non-violent civil-society leaders”.<sup>7</sup> Andrew Nkea Fuanya, bishop of one of the dioceses most involved in the war, Bamenda, released on April 17<sup>th</sup> a pastoral letter, *Now is time for peace*, where we read: “As we should have all learned, it is easy to begin a war but it is never easy to end one. We lose everything through violence, killings and burnings; but, we can gain everything by sincerely seeking justice, reconciliation and peace”. Without going into the causes of the conflict, but recognizing the reasons of it, the bishop then affirms: “Each of us has the right and a reason to react against any injustices committed, but this does not mean that we must resort to violence. Seeking peace or a cease fire is not a sign of weakness or cowardice; on the contrary, it shows maturity and proper care for the fatherland and genuine love for others”.<sup>8</sup>

The war, which started in 2017, has ancient roots. After the First World War the ancient German colony was assigned to France (about 80% of the territory) and the United Kingdom (the remaining 20%, the two most western regions, on the borders of eastern Nigeria). Hence the bilingualism of the country. It must be remembered

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<sup>7</sup> See Fides agency news: [www.fides.org](http://www.fides.org), 21.02.2020.

<sup>8</sup> Fides Ag., 22.04.2020.

## RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

that the tracing of regional and state borders was operated in Africa by European metropolitan powers, with little or no regard to the pre-existing ethnic and geographical subdivisions. Clashes began when the central government decided to “Frenchize” the two Anglophone provinces of the Southwest and Northwest. French speaking teachers went to the region, and new laws, written in French, not in accord with the Common Law system have been introduced. Subsequent protests led by teachers and lawyers were violently repressed. Then, there has been the declaration of independence of the Ambazonia, the geographical name of the two regions involved. Since then, armed militias have rapidly multiplied and clashes have begun with the regular government army.

In their February letter, bishops recall that “the violence and atrocities committed by all parties to the conflict forced 656,000 Anglophone Cameroonians from their homes, kept 800,000 children far from school (including 400,000 from Catholic schools), caused 50,000 people to flee to Nigeria, destroyed hundreds of villages and resulted in a death toll of at least two thousand people”.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. *South Sudan at a crossroads*

It is almost useless to explain how much Pope Francis cares about the reality of South Sudan: the fact is well known.<sup>10</sup> Images of Bergoglio kneeling at the feet of the two Sudanese leaders Salva Kiir and Riek Machar to implore them to make peace, at the end of a spiritual retreat convoked by the Pope himself in the Vatican, in April 2019, have gone around the world and aroused scandal. Anyway, that deliberately exaggerated gesture of submission has paid off. Peace negotiations in this young country (born in 2011) battered by a civil war preceded by years of struggles for independence, have resumed and led to an important result on the eve of the outbreak of the pandemic: on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 the Rome Resolution was signed, a declaration which involved all the parties in conflict, even the “minor” groups hitherto excluded, and established a “road map” for the resolution of the differences starting from a ceasefire. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, a new government of national unity was born, with the main antagonist of President Salva Kiir, Riek Machar, his former ally, as first vice president.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See the african section of the *La Croix* site: [www.africa.lacroix.com](http://www.africa.lacroix.com).

<sup>10</sup> About South Sudan see D.H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars. Old Wars and New Wars*, James Currey, Suffolk (UK) 2016; Z. L. Ostrowski, *Les deux soudans*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2019.

<sup>11</sup> The Rome Declaration was signed with the mediation of the Community of Sant'Egidio, which had previously supported the “Council of Churches of South Sudan”, an ecumenical representative body that played a non-secondary role during impasse moments impasse in

## RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

However, the situation on the ground remains troubled. The fighting has not stopped. South Sudan is still the country in the world with the highest share of citizenship dependent on international humanitarian aid in all, because of the war: seven million out of twelve inhabitants need the World Food Program gifts to survive. Until the end of May 2020 in South Sudan Covid has represented a threat more than a concrete reality. In the planet's lowest average age country, there has been few cases recorded, but authorities have taken rigid measures since the month of March. They were worried not being able to cope with a large number of infections, with only one laboratory to analyze tampons, located in the capital, and just four respirators for all the country. The price of confinement has been obviously high, especially in the capital Juba, with the paralysis of the informal economy of subsistence that allows the population to live.

It is in this context that the interventions of the bishops are grafted. Among these, there is one of the witnesses of the price paid by the population to the civil war, the Tombura Yambo bishop, Msgr. Hiiboro Kussala, who spoke to combatants on several occasions. "Citizens are already traumatized by the Covid-19 pandemic, they do not need further violence", he said to the agencies and publicly repeated. His words, addressed to the two main warring parties to resume negotiations, are simple and straightforward: "Let's avoid clashes, fighting or violence, let's not get involved in any conflict because of the desire for power. War does not help, instead it causes distractions and hinders development".<sup>12</sup>

Missionaries that are in the country underline that the formation of a national unity government constituted a step towards new elections and a greater political stability, and that the Covid-19 epidemic did not stop this process, but it slowed it down: the appointment of local governors has been postponed and the agreement on natural resources proceeds distribution is delayed.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, on Sunday March 22<sup>nd</sup>, the new archbishop of Juba, Stephen Ameyu Mulla, was finally able to take office, after lay and religious people protests. These groups have contested him because of his ethnic origins, triggering an investigation by the Holy See. The bishop's inaugural speech focused on the need for reconciliation in Covid times, and protests have since ceased. But the scenario is rapidly changing. At the beginning of June the news came that Covid hit Machar and other ministers. The former overcame the crisis, but some members of the government have passed away. Rumours of President Kiir's involvement have been

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previous negotiations, that resulted in the 2017 Addis Ababa agreements. The path to peace is long and not yet finished, but the synergy between Christians has produced not only appeals and invitations, but a direct involvement in the dialogues - as promoters, mediators or facilitators, according to the moments - which represents a significant case.

<sup>12</sup> In [www.solidarityssudan.org](http://www.solidarityssudan.org)

<sup>13</sup> See [www.fides.org](http://www.fides.org), 14.05.2020.

## RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

disproved and he himself has appeared publicly healthy. The number of infections is growing, but it is difficult to estimate the precise quantity in the provinces far from the capital, due to the aforementioned absence of analysis laboratories. Observers predict further spread, following the return to the villages of many South Sudanese who have left the capital subjected to the lockdown. It will therefore be in the coming months that all fighters will have to decide whether to join forces in the fight against the Covid, renouncing the clashes and respecting the commitments made during the negotiation, or to make the pandemic the pretext for new attacks, with devastating consequences for the civilian population.

### *4. So many shadows, some light*

In a press release dated April 2<sup>nd</sup>, Guterres took stock of the welcome to his appeal.<sup>14</sup> Paragraphs dedicated to sub-Saharan Africa list movements and armed groups that accepted the invitation to ceasefire. Unfortunately, they're not many: some of those who blood the Darfur, and the Southern Cameroons Defense Forces, which have been mentioned. Government adhesions received from Gambia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Ivory Coast and Niger are then reported. No response and no sign of respite, however, in regions devastated by the attacks of new jihadist formations, self-proclaimed emanations of Isis, such as those that are raging in northern Mozambique. The province of Cabo Delgado has become “the stage of a mysterious and incomprehensible war”, said the bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Nampula. What is inexplicable is blind violence against innocent civilians, and attacks that have no other purpose than to sow death and destruction. “The dramatic consequences of this crisis are evident: village fires, destruction of economic and social infrastructure, frightened and hungry populations, fleeing families, confused and disoriented without knowing where to seek shelter and protection”, says the statement.<sup>15</sup>

To find light is necessary to go further south. On April 8, 2020, a BBC service spoke about “how corona virus inspired a gangland truce in South Africa”: “Rival gang leaders in Cape Town have stopped their endless turf wars to bring food to struggling households”.<sup>16</sup>

The “miracle”, in one of the African countries in which the violence of rival gangs constitutes a scourge and a serious threat to peace and security, occurred at the impulsion of a singular figure of pastor, Andie Steele-Smith, with a past in the

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<sup>14</sup> Update on the Secretary-General's Appeal for a Global Ceasefire, 02.04.2020.

<sup>15</sup> Fides agency, 29.05.2020.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-52205727>

## RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

world of finance and which now defines itself a social entrepreneur. He convinced leaders and militants of various groups in the Cape suburbs to lay down their arms and structure a food distribution service to families during confinement. “They're the best distributors in the country. They're used to distributing other [things]. They know everybody”, says Steele.<sup>17</sup> What is more significant is that he persuaded gang members to mix themselves and deliver jointly. Statements made to the media by the people involved report a success. While violence continues in many places of South Africa, data report a 75% decrease of violent crimes as a result of the lockdown in the country, the most affected by the virus in the whole Africa.

A challenge is underway on the continent. The hypotheses of a limited spread of the pandemic are unfortunately contradicted by the data. The virus has picked up speed. It took ninety-eight days to target the first one hundred thousand people, eighteen to infect another hundred thousand. However, the experience of the AIDS pandemic - a pathology obviously very different from Covid 19 - is clear: in the conflict areas the incidence of positivity grows exponentially. Will the same happen with the Covid or, on the contrary, will the concentration on the fight against the pandemic be a reason for pacification? The Mozambican experience sounds like a warning: the main Covid outbreaks in the country are precisely in the province of Cabo Delgado, devastated by jihadist attacks. Guterres' appeal therefore has its reasons, and would deserve more attention from African religious leaders.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.karunavirus.org/story/647/>