

1999 - APJN visit to Burundi and Pastoral Letter to the Church in Burundi

November 19-26, 1999

Below follows the report of the Anglican Peace and Justice Network's delegation to Burundi along with a Pastoral letter to the Church in Burundi. It is entirely self explanatory. Please note in particular the recommendations which include a call for Communion wide support of relief efforts for displaced people.

Origin of the Visit

The request to make a pastoral visit to the Province of Burundi was initiated by The Right Reverend Pie Ntukamazina, bishop of Bujumbura, the capital city. The intent of the visit was two fold, pastoral and fact finding. That is, the delegation went to stand side by side with the church in Burundi and to listen and to hear their stories of faith and suffering.

The visit was also a fact finding mission intended to bring a voice from the Anglican Communion back to the wider church and to the international community.

The visit took place during a time of considerable violence and tension. A month before the visit, two United Nations workers had been killed and the UN has pulled back into a phase four withdrawal of activities. During the visit itself, the army engaged in a firefight with a rebel group only a short distance from the bishop's home and a grenade was set off in the local market in the heart of Bujumbura which killed four people. People in many parts of the country were being displaced from their homes due to confrontations with government forces and rebel groups.

Background of the Crisis - the Genocide

Burundi received its independence from Belgium in 1962 and attempted a democracy until 1966, which failed and led to a Tutsi dominated government until 1993 when a new democracy was established. Tragically, the newly installed president was assassinated after just three months in office which led to chaos and retributions by ethnic Hutu factions that resulted in a genocide of 150,000 + Tutsis in October 1993. Since then, another 50,000 - 100,000 persons have been killed in civil strife.

Addressing this genocide is crucial to forming a long term period of peace, prosperity and stability in the country. To be successful, the judiciary branch of government will need laws and resources that will allow it to pursue justice for the victims leading to national reconciliation.

The Coup

In 1996, a former president, Pierre Buyoya, seized control of the country in a coup. While the coup was a clear violation of democratic principles, it had the effect of calming the chaos that had gripped the country since 1993. After a tense period, and with the helpful intervention of the Anglican Church of Burundi and others, the elected National Assembly, or parliament, resumed its functions. 40 representative members of civil society were added to the 80 elected members. Most of the prior cabinet ministers remained in office. This formed a government of national unity.

The Peace Process

Since that time a painfully slow peace process has been established with Julius Nyerere of Tanzania serving as mediator. This became known as Arusha, named for the site of the talks. The establishment of Arusha involved work both within the country and outside. Unfortunately, Arusha does not include many of those parties who have engaged in armed conflict in different parts of the country, so called rebel groups. It is not clear who all these parties are or what they are seeking. Some are known entities such as the CCND, a breakaway group of the largest political party. A cease-fire to end the violence is not possible until these factions are brought into negotiations.

There is enormous distrust among the various political groups. Civil society has a very low regard of politicians. Some politicians are seen as perpetrators of the genocide and numerous charges have been made. Nevertheless, the government and political parties working within the country have made impressive strides in reaching agreement on a framework for peace and a new government. These agreements, known as the Peace Project, include a transition period of five years and a period of democratic consolidation for another five years. There is agreement on the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission modeled on the South African experience. The progress in developing these agreements is remarkable given the recent genocide. The international community has not given due regard to this effort and there is rightful resentment among the various parts of government. The APJN delegation was fortunate to meet virtually every major leader in the country, including its president, and noted that there is enormous goodwill and expertise among many of these leaders, both among Hutus and Tutsis.

The recent death of Julius Nyerere has stalled the peace process, but there is great hope that Nelson Mandela's acceptance to assume the role of mediator will bring new impetus to the pursuit of a just peace.

Hutus and Tutsis

The delegation learned very quickly that the Hutu/Tutsi divide is very complicated. It is simplistic and even racist stereotyping to suggest that all Hutus hate Tutsis and vice versa. Certainly, there is no doubt that there are factions in both ethnic groups who exploit ethnic differences and fuel hatred and commit horrendous atrocities. But it is also obvious that most Hutus and Tutsis are prepared to live together as neighbors much as they have done for centuries prior to the arrival of the colonists. In fact, many Hutus have come forward as witnesses of the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsis. This is possible because Hutus and Tutsis live side by side in villages throughout the country and Hutus have been subjected to seeing heinous crimes of genocide committed against their neighbors. Ethnism is practiced by persons seeking personal power or influence and do not represent the masses. Sadly, many in the international community see the conflict as one entire ethnic group against another. We saw, however, many persons from the two ethnic groups, both in the church and government, working together to overcome the chaos and discord created by the genocide.

Refugees and Displaced Persons

There are approximately 1.3 million Burundians who are refugees and displaced persons, 500,000 in neighboring Tanzania and 800,000 inside the country. The population outside the country is made up of a majority of Hutus. Tutsis and moderate Hutus fleeing the genocide comprise several hundred thousand displaced people within Burundi and several hundred thousand people, mainly Hutus, have been put into regroupment camps to separate them from conflict areas. A visit to one camp, less than three months old, in a suburb of Bujumbura revealed severe illness and death among children and a lack of food, blankets and tarps for shelter. We all found that visit particularly distressing.

The Regional Conflict

While Burundi attempts to forge a peace agreement, it is made exceedingly more complicated by the regional divisions of all the neighboring states that make up the Great Lakes region. The Lusaka Accord, a framework for ending the conflict, is extremely fragile and appears to be unraveling. We heard disturbing reports that some neighboring states are helping to train and equip Hutu rebels to fight against the Burundi government. Zimbabwe is one such country accused despite outraged denials. President Buyoya, a very articulate leader, noted that the regional unrest has its origins in the Uganda war during the reign of Idi Amin, which led to the strife in Rwanda that culminated in the 1994 genocide. That conflict has been at the root of the strife in Congo. The long war in Angola now further complicates the current regional conflicts. The delegation was very disturbed by the extent to which the violence is perpetuated as a direct consequence of arms transfers. Somewhere, there are people profiting from the unrest through the sale of armaments emanating outside the region.

Role of the Church

The Episcopal Church in Burundi has provided significant leadership during the current conflict, encouraging the different groups to join together for the good of the nation and to forge ahead towards peace. The delegation was deeply impressed to learn of the church's role after the 1996 coup, which may have prevented a further downward spiral of the violence and chaos. The Anglican Church, along with other denominations, members of the National Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church stood as facilitators between the elected officials who went into hiding in various embassies and the coup leaders. This facilitation made possible the success of forming the present government of national unity. Had the elected assembly fled the country into exile, the progress made so far towards a peace agreement could not have been made.

The Church has influenced the governance of the country by asserting moral authority and has also preached peace, reconciliation and healing throughout the congregations. A meeting with the house of bishops, four of the five present, surfaced a network of ecumenical cooperation at the most local of levels. However, ecumenical and interfaith cooperation among religious leaders was less obvious, including among Anglicans, Protestants, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics and Muslims.

Recommendations of the Delegation

1. We call upon the new mediator for the Arusha talks to work urgently to bring all legitimate parties into the peace process, with the support of the present groups now in the talks, so that all voices can be heard. We also call upon those legitimate parties to accept the invitation to join the talks without pre-condition and to implement an immediate cease-fire to be observed by all sides. The initiation of a cease-fire is the highest priority. Once established, we call for the closure of the regroupment camps and the return of all displaced people in the country to their communities.
2. We call for the churches in Burundi to stand ready to support the Arusha talks through consultation with the negotiating parties, offering moral reflection and advice.
3. We recognize the suffering of people who have been placed into regroupment camps. We saw sick children and heard of others who are dying daily. We note the urgent need for food, blankets and shelter. We therefore call on all church partners throughout the Anglican Communion to send relief aid to the Province of Burundi so that this suffering may be alleviated. We also urge all governments and non-governmental organizations to do all in their power to provide relief to the victims of war in the country.
4. We were disturbed by reports of growing instability in the Great Lakes region and recommend an international inquiry into the arms trade that fuels much of the conflict in the various neighboring states.
5. We support the concept of a regional meeting of Anglican leaders to discuss peace initiatives for all the states comprising the Great Lakes area. We also call for more local cooperation of religious leaders in Burundi in support of building a climate of nonviolence and reconciliation.
6. We call upon Anglicans and people of goodwill to hold Burundi firmly in their prayers.

Conclusion

The delegation leaves Burundi far more hopeful that peace can be achieved than when it arrived. It is not so naïve as to underestimate the enormous task that lies ahead for the leadership of the country. But it did find both a faithful church and many men and women of goodwill in the government who hold the promise and the key to success. The churches role in reconciliation, justice and truth will be crucial to the implementation of any peace agreements.

Certainly, the Burundi people deserve a time of peace and a chance for prosperity and stability. Burundi is a gracious, hospitable and beautiful country. The church is carrying out its mission with vitality and immense faith. And the delegation is enormously indebted to the church for its incredibly warm embrace and we left Burundi with a hope of returning to a celebration of genuine peace.

The Reverend Canon Brian J. Grieves, The Episcopal Church, USA Mrs Valerie Martin, The Church in Wales

The Reverend Canon Themba Vundla, Church of the Province of Southern Africa

For further information contact:

Canon Brian Grieves, secretary
Anglican Peace and Justice Network
815 Second Avenue
New York, NY 10017
Phone: 212-922-5207
Email bgrieves@episcopalchurch.org

A Pastoral Letter to the Church in Burundi

From the Anglican Peace and Justice Network Delegation

Christmas, 1999

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

During our visit to your beautiful country November 19-26, 1999, we were deeply moved by your generous hospitality and warm welcome. We saw in you a faithful and joyous church, committed to the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate during this most treasured and holy season. We were humbled by this witness which is made in the midst of a crisis in your country marred by violence, war and civil strife. We saw the sad byproducts of civil unrest in a regroupment camp and heard the heartbreaking stories of those who suffered the loss of loved ones in the strife. A group of Anglican university students moved us with their strong commitment to peace for the country through fidelity to faith and scripture.

We are also grateful to the leaders of the present government, including Ministers, leaders of the General Assembly and political parties, for making themselves available to us, including President Pierre Buyoya. We heard voices both from Tutsi and Hutu leaders who expressed commitment to a country that honors the rights of all Burundians regardless of ethnic identity. At every opportunity, we prevailed upon political leaders to exercise moral authority so that a just peace can prevail in the nation. We believe that it is important for the international community to more readily recognize that a coalition government made up of elected officials and representation from the civil society are working diligently to find a solution the nation's crisis.

As a result of our time with you, we make the following recommendations:

- We call upon the new mediator for the Arusha talks to work urgently to bring all legitimate parties into the peace process, with the support of the present groups now in the talks, so that all voices can be heard. We also call upon those legitimate parties to accept the invitation to join the talks without pre-condition and to implement an immediate cease-fire to be observed by all sides. The initiation of a cease-fire is the highest priority. Once established, we call for the closure of the

regroupment camps and the return of all displaced people in the country to their communities.

- We call for the churches in Burundi to stand ready to support the Arusha talks through consultation with the negotiating parties, offering moral reflection and advice.
- We recognize the suffering of people who have been placed into regroupment camps. We saw sick children and heard of others who are dying daily. We note the urgent need for food, blankets and shelter. We therefore call on all church partners throughout the Anglican Communion to send relief aid to the Province of Burundi so that this suffering may be alleviated. We also urge all governments and non-governmental organizations to do all in their power to provide relief to the victims of war in the country.
- We were disturbed by reports of growing instability in the Great Lakes region and recommend an international inquiry into the arms trade that fuels much of the conflict in the various neighboring states.
- We support the concept of a regional meeting of Anglican leaders to discuss peace initiatives for all the states comprising the Great Lakes area. We also call for more local cooperation of religious leaders in Burundi in support of building a climate of nonviolence and reconciliation. We call upon all Anglicans, Christians and people of goodwill worldwide to soak the country of Burundi in prayer -- asking God to bring peace and concord.

Sisters and brothers, as we mark once again the coming of the Prince of Peace, we reach out to you and join hands as partners for peacemaking. We will remain in solidarity with you and pray for the day when we can join with you in celebrating a just peace for your nation. Glory be to God. Alleluia.

The Reverend Canon Brian J. Grieves, The Episcopal Church, USA

Mrs Valerie Martin, The Church in Wales

The Reverend Canon Themba Vundla, Church of the Province of Southern Africa

For further information contact:

Canon Brian Grieves, secretary
Anglican Peace and Justice Network
815 Second Avenue
New York, NY 10017
Phone: 212-922-5207
Email bgrieves@episcopalchurch.org
Brian J. Grieves
bgrieves@episcopalchurch.org