

Sisters in Kenya face risk of violence

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WHEATON—The jewel of East Africa, Kenya, has been caught up in tribal violence intensified since the disputed results of the December presidential election. What started as riots in the urban slums and rural regions around Nairobi, Eldoret and Kisumu has spread a swath of devastation throughout the nation. Several groups of African-based Sisters working in connection with the Wheaton Franciscans—namely Sr. Florence Muia, ASN, and directress of Upendo Village, an HIV/AIDS program that provides for healthcare, nutrition and economic sustainability in Naivasha—are threatened by escalating violence that surrounds them. Sr. Mary Goretty Anyango, FSA, who works on a Franciscan HIV/AIDS project in Kisumu, and Sr. Venantius Mune, LSOSF, and director of the Franciscan Youth Alive initiative in Kasarani.

Some 800 lives have been lost since the outset of clashes between rival gangs representing the two majority tribes, Kikuyus and Luos, and some 255,000 people have fled the violence—many have left for the bordering countries of Uganda and Tanzania to escape attacks by roving gangs of young men toting an assortment of machetes and makeshift weapons, according to Jan. 28 news reports published by the *New York Times*, *Reuters* and the *BBC*.

A series of telephone calls and the subject of e-mails over the last month between the Sisters in Africa and the Wheaton Franciscans have increasingly demonstrated the tense nature of the Kenyan situation.

In a Jan. 29 conference call between Wheaton's Provincial Directress Sr. Margaret Zulaski, OSF, JPIC Leader Sr. Sheila, OSF, and a weary Sr. Florence, the situation continues to be dire. "It was quiet last night," but it was the calm before the storm.

With the light of day came news that parliamentarian Melitus Mugabe Were, a highly respected member of the opposition party known for a desire for political unity, was assassinated. His murder, which worked to escalate the violence further, is being investigated, according to reports published Jan. 29 in the *New York Times*.

With the prayers of support from the American Sisters along with a commitment of prayers from the Association of Sisterhood of Kenya and the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi gathered within her heart, Sr. Florence has hope. She looks forward to negotiations arranged by Kofi Annan, former United Nations secretary general, between the two political rivals, Odinga and Kibaki. The *New York Times* reported that both leaders "deplored" the killings and urged calm. However, a key issue in the matter of negotiations is a move to end the violence.

All politics aside, Sr. Florence has been working with civic and faith groups in Naivasha to bring aid to those in need. Today, her time is monopolized as she continues to work

with the Red Cross helping to organize their efforts to distribute food and water. She has also managed to arrange for the distribution of anti-retroviral drugs, which are essential for her Upendo Village clients. The drugs are available at Kijabe Hospital in Naivasha. She also secured temporary shelter for 500 displaced women and children; they should be safe within the confines of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Naivasha, according to Sr. Florence.

During a Jan. 27 telephone call between Sr. Florence and Sr. Beatrice Hernandez, OSF, at her LaPorte, Ind., home, the situation in the Rift Valley was described as “very volatile.” The 3-acre compound, where the Sisters live and provide a community services, is currently hosting refugees from the surrounding communities. Sr. Florence revealed that armed gangs have been spotted moving past Upendo Village, headed for Lake Naivasha, a few miles away, where they are suspected to be gathering as a more unified movement.

Despite neighborhood fires, looting and blood letting, Sr. Florence has repeatedly risked her personal safety, driving into the nearby communities to pick up staff members, their families and neighbors and bringing them to Upendo Village compound. The men remain steadfast in their desire to preserve their homes, refusing an offer of safety from the Sisters, according to Sr. Florence.

Sr. Florence has come face-to-face with armed gang members during her rescue campaign. Fortunately for the former probation officer, she managed to continue her travels unharmed through the area.

A brick wall, some 6-feet-tall, has effectively kept armed rioters from entering the compound. Plans to install an electrified, barbed wire fence have not been completed. Meanwhile, roving bands of ethnic antagonists continue to travel the main road near Upendo Village compound. A constant stream of distress calls have been received by Sr. Florence, who has notified local authorities for needed assistance. Meanwhile, the Sisters have focused their attention on tending to the immediate problems. Food supplies, so far have held up, according to Sr. Florence, but their reserves are being depleted. Still she continues her rescue campaign, which so far has served to assist at least 20 children and women who have been transported to the compound for safety.

In a Jan. 23 e-mail transmission last week from Sr. Mary Goretty to Sr. Sheila Kinsey, OSF, and leader of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office of the Wheaton Franciscans, the outcome of the situation was described as one in dire need of God’s intercession. Road blocks and chaos dominate, according to Sr. Mary. “So just pray that justice and truth may be found, especially (by) the visitors who have come to help the situation in the country,” including Annan, noted Sr. Mary.

And on Jan. 28, President John Kofuor of Ghana toured the Rift Valley, where the violence has shifted in recent days. Kofuor is attempting along with other members of the African Union to mediate the situation.

In a Jan. 18 message from Sr. Venantius from Youth Alive, she thanked the Wheaton Franciscans for their prayers. She noted, “With all the chaos in the country over the outcome of the general elections, rest assured that Youth Alive is not a part of the chaos; as a matter of fact, we’ve been having a seminar on quality leadership which condemned heavily the unrest.