

Bishops hope adultery charges don't shift focus from crisis

CAPE TOWN, South Africa – The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference said it hopes that allegations of adultery against Zimbabwean Archbishop Pius Ncube of Bulawayo will not divert attention from the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe.

Noting with “sadness and concern” the widely publicized allegations, the bishops said they come “at a time when Zimbabwe is facing one of the worst political and economic crises in its history, a crisis which Archbishop Ncube has consistently expressed great concern about and which we believe the country should be focused on.”

Archbishop Ncube, an outspoken opponent of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, plans to deny in court allegations of adultery that his lawyer said are part of a well-orchestrated campaign to discredit him. According to Zimbabwe's state media, Onesimus Sibanda is claiming \$160,000 in damages from Archbishop Ncube for the alleged affair with his wife, Rosemary Sibanda.

A July 20 statement issued by Archbishop Buti Tlhagale of Johannesburg, South Africa, president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, said many Catholics in Zimbabwe are suffering because of the country's economic crisis, which is causing “a huge number” to seek refuge in neighboring countries, crossing borders “at great danger to their lives.”

Food and fuel shortages are acute in Zimbabwe, which is crippled by the highest rate of inflation in the world and unemployment of more than 80 percent. With elections scheduled for March, political violence has intensified, causing many to flee. More than 5,000 Zimbabweans have been arrested for illegally crossing the South African border since the beginning of July. About 3 million Zimbabweans are believed to already be in South Africa.

Archbishop Ncube's “voice of reason in this context is very important and should continue to be heard,” the bishops said.

“We therefore hope that Zimbabweans and the international community will not be sidetracked” by these allegations in their efforts to find “a lasting solution to the serious problems bedeviling the country,” the bishops said.

Noting that Archbishop Ncube's "guilt or innocence has yet to be proved," the bishops appealed to "the media and everyone concerned to allow the law to take its course without passing premature judgment on the archbishop."

"We call on all the faithful in Zimbabwe and the international community to continue to pray for the archbishop during this ... period," they said.