

Church leaders cautiously hopeful over Zimbabwe power-sharing deal

CAPE TOWN, South Africa - Church leaders expressed cautious hope over a deal signed by Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai that lays the framework for negotiations aimed at forming a power-sharing government.

"The immediate expectation is that it will bring an end to the violence," said Father Frederick Chiromba, secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, in a July 22 telephone interview from the capital, Harare.

"Once peace has been established, meaningful dialogue can take place," Father Chiromba told Catholic News Service, noting that the "parties need to enter into dialogue in good faith."

"There should be no plans to revert to violence if things don't go their way," he said.

Human rights groups said opposition supporters have been the targets of brutal state-sponsored violence since March, leaving more than 80 dead and 200,000 displaced.

Negotiations between the ruling party and opposition "may allow us to move beyond this crisis," Father Chiromba said.

The preliminary agreement, mediated by South African President Thabo Mbeki, was signed July 21 in a Harare hotel. It sets a two-week deadline for the government and two factions of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change to discuss issues, including a unity government and how to hold new elections.

"The deal signed after two weeks needs to be long-term, durable and people-driven," Father Chiromba said. He expressed hope that it will bring democracy to Zimbabwe, which has "been a long time coming."

But many people are "cautious and skeptical" about the agreement and "fear that

the opposition will be swallowed by the ruling party," he said.

Mr. Mugabe, 84, who has ruled Zimbabwe for 28 years, was sworn in for a sixth term after a June 27 run-off election in which he was the only candidate. Mr. Tsvangirai, who won the first round of the presidential poll in March, boycotted the runoff, citing violence against his supporters.

Talks between Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF party and the Movement for Democratic Change have been taking place since March 2007 when the Southern African Development Community, known as SADC, appointed Mr. Mbeki to act as mediator in the hope that the South African president could help pressure Mr. Mugabe to enact democratic reforms.

"But things could move forward now with the involvement of the SADC, African Union and even the United Nations," Father Chiromba said, noting that "it feels like the whole world is praying for us."

"What is needed now is the political will for change," Father Chiromba said.

Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa, said the framework agreement "offers much hope for Zimbabwe's future" but the country's future "depends on how the deal is worked out." He noted that the two-week deadline "reflects the urgency of finding a solution to the crisis."

Bishop Dowling called the agreement "a notable achievement" but said "there is a great deal of work to be done."

The signing "follows pressure from all quarters," he told CNS in a July 22 telephone interview from Rustenburg. "Much depends on what happens in the next two weeks, and the outcome must give hope to the people of Zimbabwe, who have clearly indicated their desire for change."

"I hope the agreement on power-sharing will do justice to the will of the people that was expressed in their voting in March," when the opposition won the majority of seats in parliament, Bishop Dowling said.

"The months of brutality against people, who have been tortured, killed and

displaced, cannot be swept under the carpet,” he said.

The ruling party “cannot be allowed to continue to wield political and military power,” Bishop Dowling said, noting that the “appalling violence is an attempt to subvert the will of the people.”

Meanwhile, Anglican Bishop Sebastian Bakare of Harare warned the opposition to be wary of Mugabe’s intentions for the power-sharing agreement, reported Ecumenical News International.

Speaking to journalists at the 2008 Lambeth Conference near Canterbury, England, Bishop Bakare recalled an agreement signed in 1987 between Mugabe and the then-opposition leader, Joshua Nkomo of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union.

“It ended up with Mugabe’s party swallowing the other party, and Mugabe is in power still today,” said Bishop Bakare. “I want to believe that they on the opposition side are aware of that pact and aware that Mugabe is not there just to hand in power.”