

Church leaders dismayed

DILI, East Timor – Officials of the Diocese of Baucau have expressed dismay over the rape of girls at a convent and the burning of church property following the announcement of the appointment of East Timor's new prime minister.

Father Francisco Pinheiro da Silva, vicar general of the Baucau Diocese, told the Asian church news agency UCA News that unidentified men raped about nine girls – one of them only 8 years old and the others 15-17 – at around 2 a.m. Aug. 10 in the Canossian convent in Baucau.

“Indications show that the brutality and immoral actions were done by Fretilin (former ruling party) supporters,” said Father da Silva.

The British news agency Reuters reported Aug. 13 that police arrested a 16-year-old male on suspicion that he raped an 11-year-old student at an orphanage attached to the convent.

Father da Silva told UCA News Aug. 13 that apart from the attack on the convent there had been attacks on church and public buildings. Over three days, Aug. 7-9, the offices of the diocese, the Caritas aid agency and the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services, and a Catholic-run kindergarten were burned down, he said in a telephone interview from Baucau.

He said more than 600 houses were burned down and more than 6,000 people have fled into the jungle. He cited reports that three villages in Viqueque district were burned to the ground.

Baucau district is calm now, he said, but many still live in fear and are traumatized because thousands of people have lost their homes and property.

Reuters reported that police in Baucau had arrested 71 people in relation to the violence.

After President Jose Ramos-Horta announced Aug. 5 that he would appoint former president and independence hero Xanana Gusmao as prime minister, Fretilin party supporters demonstrated on the streets in Baucau and Dili. Baucau is considered a Fretilin stronghold.

Fretilin won the most votes in the June national election, but its 21 seats in the 65-member parliament are short of the majority. Gusmao's party picked up 18 seats, but it later formed an alliance with three other parties to form a parliamentary majority.

Fretilin's leaders still are demanding the right to form the government and claim they will take the matter to court.

The sacking of 600 soldiers in 2006 by former Fretilin Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri led to clashes that resulted in more than 20 dead and 100,000 homeless in this country of 1 million. About 3,000 international police and troops are in East Timor to keep order.

The August violence shattered the relative peace that had prevailed up to and through the presidential election May 9 and the parliamentary elections June 30.

Bishop Basilio do Nascimento of Baucau condemned the brutality of "irresponsible people" who have burned, raped and destroyed public facilities.

"I'm really sad about the immoral actions of irresponsible people," he told local media Aug. 12. The bishop said he regretted the actions of "stupid people" who do not accept the political reality.

"I do not accuse anybody, but anyone who is behind those violations must bear responsibility," the bishop said.

The Fretilin government under Alkatiri was at odds with the Catholic leadership on several occasions, including the matter of religious education in schools; the government backed down from a proposal to make this optional.

After breaking away from decades of Indonesian rule in 1999 and formally declaring statehood in 2002, East Timor faced major security, humanitarian and economic challenges. Although it has significant offshore oil and gas reserves, its unemployment rate is about 50 percent.