Government forces kill two church workers in Sudanese border state

WASHINGTON – Two church workers were murdered by government forces in Sudan’s South Kordofan state in what one church adviser called a campaign of “ethnic cleansing.”

John Ashworth, an adviser to the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, which includes the Catholic Church, would not elaborate on the religious affiliation of the church workers, who were killed June 11 after two days in detention. He told Catholic News Service that he could not be more specific because church officials on the ground were becoming more nervous about drawing attention to the church.

The two were among “a huge number of murdered civilians,” Ashworth said, referring to a “deliberate policy by the Khartoum regime to kill its own citizens. It is ethnic cleansing, and it is not new,” he said in an email.

Ashworth said the people being killed are Nuba, an indigenous people of Sudan.

“The international community should stop trying to fudge this as part of the North-South conflict,” he said. “The killing needs to be stopped, and this is the first priority.”

South Kordofan sits along the disputed border of Sudan and Southern Sudan, which is due to become independent July 9. Fighting between members of the Sudan Armed Forces and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army from the South began in mid-May.

Sources on the ground in South Kordofan June 11 reported finding dead members of
both armies along the road between the towns of Heiban and Kauda, where cell phone lines had been cut. The United Nations reported bombing and artillery shelling in the Nuba Mountains area, and on June 13 said it has spilled into Southern Sudan.

Coadjutor Bishop Michael Didi Adgum Mangoria of El Obeid, the diocese that includes South Kordofan state, said the entire population of the city of Kadugli had fled.

The bishop told the Vatican missionary news agency Fides that two Comboni nuns and a priest who had been working in Kadugli had taken refuge in a U.N. compound. He said U.N. personnel there “are simply observers and not peacekeepers. They aren’t even able to protect themselves, let alone the civilians.”

Monsignor Roko Taban Mousa, apostolic administrator of Malakal, Southern Sudan, told Fides in early June that the tens of thousands of people fleeing the disputed area around Abyei, also in South Kordofan, had resulted in a serious humanitarian problem. While aid is arriving from other areas of Southern Sudan, it is not enough to cover the needs of the refugees, he said.

A referendum on Abyei’s political future had been scheduled for January but never took place because of disagreements over who was eligible to vote. The Sudanese government insisted that the nomadic Misseriya, a northern-aligned tribe that takes its cattle to Abyei during several months of the dry season, be allowed to participate, but that was rejected by the permanent residents of Abyei, mostly members of the Dinka Ngok tribe who support the Southern Sudan government.

Similar votes are planned for other border areas, including Blue Nile and other parts of South Kordofan states, yet Sudan has dragged its feet on implementation.

Meanwhile, in Rome, Caritas Internationalis reported that its organization in
Southern Sudan aimed to provide water, food, shelter and health care to the 100,000 people they expected would be displaced because of the border fighting.

The Caritas program, working with the local Catholic Church, plans to spend $7.6 million to help the refugees through July of next year, said a statement from Caritas headquarters in Rome.

*Contributing to this story was Sarah Delaney in Rome.*