

Zambian bishops express dismay over delay

LUSAKA, Zambia – Zambia's Catholic bishops have expressed "great dismay" over the government's delay in reviewing and enacting a new constitution.

"The people are tired of the slow pace" of the constitutional review process, said the Zambian bishops' conference in a May 16 statement.

The bishops urged the government "to desist from excessive legalism" and said that Zambia "can no longer afford the luxury of procrastination, which has characterized the government's approach" to the process.

Zambia, where a British-drafted constitution has been used since the former colony's independence in 1964, "is in dire need of an inclusive constitution that will not only stand the test of time but also empower" Zambians to face challenges, they said.

The bishops said they are convinced Zambians "have unambiguously made up their minds that they want a new constitution, not mere amendments to the current one."

"More than ever before Zambia needs a constitution that will give rise to a positive political transformation," they said, adding that a new constitution must be in place before the 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The bishops support recommendations, which were made in 2005 by a constitutional review committee, that the president be elected by a "50 plus 1 percent majority" instead of by simple majority. The recommendations also provide for an independent judiciary.

The church has been outspoken in its insistence that the new constitution be enacted by a constituent assembly instead of Parliament, which is dominated by President Levy Mwanawasa's party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy.

The Zambian government said May 9 that preparations had begun for a national referendum to pass a constitution, but warned that the process would be lengthy and costly.

The bishops, as well as other human rights groups, have said they would stage nationwide demonstrations to demand a new constitution.

Without a new constitution, there will be “more tension and increased polarization and confrontation in our land,” they said.

Noting that many African countries have learned “to look up to Zambia” after 1991 elections put an end to one-party rule, the bishops said the country has a duty to show other countries how to pass peacefully “from an outdated constitution to a people-driven one.”