

Thursday, March 05, 2009

## SUDAN: Aid agencies, churches on alert after warrant for president

By Fredrick Nzwili, March 04, 2009

[Ecumenical News International, Nairobi] Christian leaders have urged calm in Sudan after the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for President Omar al-Bashir on war crime charges over the conflict in the Darfur region of Africa's biggest country.

"I support it. There have been a lot of killings. Al-Bashir as president has to be answerable for all those atrocities," the Rev. Tut Mai of the Presbyterian Church of Sudan said after the issuing of the warrant on March 4. Still, while supporting the issuing of the warrant, Mai cautioned that it might affect key peace processes in Sudan, which experienced a two-decades-long civil war as well as the separate conflict in Darfur.

According to a U.N. official, more than 300,000 people have been killed in Darfur during five years of conflict. The warrant against al-Bashir on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity was the first time such a warrant has been issued against a sitting head of state.

"He is suspected of being criminally responsible ... for intentionally directing attacks against an important part of the civilian population of Darfur, Sudan, murdering, exterminating, raping, torturing and forcibly transferring large numbers of civilians, and pillaging their property," court spokesperson Laurence Blairon said.

"There is nervousness in the country," the Roman Catholic apostolic administrator of El Obeid in central Sudan, Bishop Antonio Menegazzo, told Ecumenical News International. "The arrest warrant was expected and the authorities are afraid of disorder. There are those against the warrant and those in favor, but the latter cannot show their feelings: it is dangerous."

On March 3, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu, writing in the New York Times, said African leaders should support a bid to arrest the Sudanese president.

"Because the victims in Sudan are African, African leaders should be the staunchest supporters of efforts to see perpetrators brought to account," said the retired Anglican archbishop of Cape Town. "Yet rather than stand by those who have suffered in Darfur, African leaders have so far rallied behind the man responsible for turning that corner of Africa into a graveyard."

Hundreds of people were reported to have demonstrated in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, after the court announcement was made.

"As soon as the radio announced the arrest warrant the demonstrations started in the center of El Obeid and in other areas," said Menegazzo, whose diocese covers Darfur. "I foresee a difficult time for Sudan. Relations with many countries will worsen and this will negatively influence the welfare of the country."

In Geneva, the director of Action by Churches Together International (ACT) urged all groups in Sudan to remain calm.

"This is a legal process for the international legal and U.N. institutions. This is the time for all parties to have patience," said ACT's Zambian-born director, John Nduna. "I call upon the government and leading political parties to maintain a sober mind in light of the arrest warrant."

"The presence of humanitarian actors, the United Nations, and the African Union in Sudan should not be compromised," said Nduna. "The last to be affected by this arrest warrant should be the innocent civilians in Darfur."

Nyiker Okoth Awin, executive secretary of Sudanaid, a Sudanese agency that works with church relief groups, told Ecumenical News International on March 4 in Nairobi that he feared non-governmental organizations would be targeted in Sudan as a result of the arrest warrant.

"The church will also be targeted because the fundamentalist Muslims in the country look at the church as a foreign body. It may be targeted through its humanitarian bodies or as church itself," stated Awin.

Reimund Reubelt, chairperson of Sign of Hope, a German interdenominational agency, said, however, "This arrest warrant is significant for the peace process in Sudan. Peace needs forgiveness and forgiveness needs justice. This warrant shows the victims and the relatives of the victims that the international judiciary does not turn a blind eye to Sudan."

In Germany, Gerrit Noltensmeier, the special representative for Sudan of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Germany's biggest Protestant umbrella, welcomed the issuing of the warrant, and an orderly legal process, "to pursue allegations of violations of humanitarian law and justice."

He warned however that the international community had so far failed to use effective measures to bring peace to Sudan, and urged faith leaders to play a peacemaking role.

"The religious communities in Sudan, especially Christians and Muslims, will, we hope, use the possibilities at their disposal to promote reconciliation and peace between the warring groups in a torn country," said Noltensmeier.