

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

After conclave: cardinals who deserve refugee status return to troubled countries

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The cardinals who participated in the Conclave are leaving Rome and returning home. However, some of them — and not a few — could ask the Italian government for asylum, as they live in countries where violence is rife and no one is safe, especially

Christians. Not even them.

On 8 May, while Cardinal Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla was voting in the Sistine Chapel,

armed men broke into the parish complex of St. Mary Help of Christians in his home country of South Sudan. They killed Paul Tamania, a young coordinator of the Catholic Organisation for Development and Peace (CODEP), in the diocese of Tombura-Yambio, and it is thought that they may have been criminals or fighters from one of the many ethnic militias. On 10 December last year, James Undo, the director of the parish choir, was killed in the same parish by armed men who entered the church for no apparent reason and opened fire before fleeing. Three years ago, the parish set up a refugee camp which took in thousands of people displaced by the violence that has continued to ravage the country since the start of the civil war in 2013. Clashes have intensified and spread in recent weeks, following heightened tensions between the Dinka and Nuer leaders — the two largest ethnic groups who have been competing for political office and power since South Sudan gained independence in 2011.

"The church is not a battlefield; it is a sacred place and a refuge where people come to find God's peace, not man's cruelty," read a statement released by Bishop Barani Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala of Tombura-Yambio in the aftermath of the attack. 'That such a sanctuary should be violated by acts of murder is a grave sin and a wound to our collective humanity.' Addressing the authorities, he said: 'Save your people, restore peace and security. It is your solemn duty to protect the life and dignity of all citizens.'

Cardinal Chibly Langlois also has good reasons to seek asylum. He lives in Haiti and is the bishop of Les Cayes. For years, Haiti has largely been a land of conquest and conflict, with hundreds of armed gangs living off illegal activities. In the capital, Port-au-Prince, alone, there are around 300 gangs. Last month, Archbishop Max Leroy Mésidor of Port-au-Prince and president of the Haitian Episcopal Conference told Vatican media that he had been forced to close 28 parishes in his archdiocese for security reasons and that pastoral activities in 40 others were continuing intermittently under constant threat. "Haiti is burning and bleeding; it is waiting for urgent support. Who will come to help us?" he asked the world, denouncing not only the inaction of the Haitian authorities, but also that of the Kenyan police contingent sent more than a year ago — the only international intervention implemented so far under the auspices of the UN — who are completely unprepared and unmotivated to risk their lives. In the first three months of 2025 alone, 1,617 people died and 580 were injured in clashes, assaults, and attacks on public and private facilities in Haiti. Almost half of these victims were civilians. "The Haitian people are a martyred people," said Father Marc-Henry Siméon, spokesman for the Haitian Bishops' Conference. "The Church, which is in communion with this people,

is experiencing this suffering in its own flesh.” Many priests, lay missionaries and nuns have already lost their lives. One of the most recent losses in the Catholic Church was the death of two sisters of the Little Sisters of Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, Evanette Onezaire and Jeanne Voltaire, in Mirebalais last March. They were killed when the armed gang coalition Viv Ansanm invaded the city and surrounding areas, attacking shops, police stations and even the university hospital.

In Myanmar, the military junta that has been in power since a coup in 2021

continues to bomb areas where popular militias are challenging the government army. This is the difficult reality facing Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, as he returns home. Since the beginning of the year, three churches have already been deliberately targeted. In February, the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Mindat, Chin State, was **bombed**. The roof and windows were particularly damaged, rendering the building unusable.

Then, on the eve of St Patrick's Day (17 March), government soldiers set fire to the cathedral dedicated to the saint in Bhamo, Kachin State. They had already destroyed the rectory, the building housing the diocesan offices, and the adjoining high school there in February. However, despite being seriously damaged, the cathedral was not completely destroyed. In April, the Catholic Church of Christ the King in Falam, a town in the Hakha diocese in Chin State, was destroyed by bombing. Since November 2023, the government army has occupied the remains of Christ the King Cathedral in Kayah State, having bombed it and turned it into an operational base.

The diocese's bishop, Monsignor Celso Ba Shwe, has been displaced along with all the diocese's priests and religious personnel. He lived in the forest for weeks with tens of thousands of his diocese's faithful before finding a safe haven. In areas where fighting is taking place, insecurity means that many of the faithful are unable to attend church, even if they still have one. Despite the risks and threats, priests continue to devote themselves to the faithful to ensure they receive the comfort of the sacraments, often at great personal risk. The latest victim is Father Donald Martin Ye Naing Win, parish priest at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in the Sagaing region, one of the areas worst affected by the war. He was killed in his rectory in February.

In Africa, America and Asia, other cardinals continue to live alongside and share in the difficulties and dangers faced by their religious communities.