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CAR | CSW Welcomes Pope Francis Call for Peace

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomed Pope Francis' call for all sides of the conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) to disarm and replace their weapons "with justice, love, mercy and authentic peace."

Pope Francis visited CAR on Nov. 29 as part of a three-nation tour which included Kenya and Uganda. Speaking to worshippers at the Grand Mosque of Koudoukou in the capital Bangui, he noted that "Christians, Muslims and members of the traditional religions have lived together in peace for many years" and called on the religious communities to work for an end to the religious violence that has plagued the country for the last three years. Pope Francis went on to say, "Together, we must say no to hatred, no to revenge and no to violence, particularly that violence which is perpetrated in the name of a religion or of God himself."

In comments that will bolster support for interfaith co-operation, Pope Francis thanked Muslim and Christian leaders for defending and protecting members of all religious confessions and for establishing interfaith dialogue.

The interfaith peace efforts have been jointly spearheaded by the Catholic Archbishop, Chief Imam and Chairman of the Evangelical Alliance. The National Interfaith Peace Platform was awarded the Sergio Vieira de Mello Award on World Humanitarian Day on Aug. 19, and the UN Independent Expert on CAR has noted its role in the prevention of violence and welcomed the efforts of religious leaders to offer shelter to people displaced by the conflict.

CAR's civil conflict assumed a religious dimension in March 2013 when Seleka, a predominantly Muslim rebel coalition, took power in a coup, suspending the constitution, dissolving the government and National Assembly, and eventually installing one of its leaders, Michael Djotodia, as president. In September 2013, Djotodia officially disbanded Seleka. Many rebels refused to disarm and sectarian violence increased.

Sustained and severe human rights violations eventually resulted in retributive violence following the emergence of anti-Seleka groups commonly referred to as 'anti-Balaka' (anti-balle AK - anti- AK47 bullets). Although the anti-Balaka groups have been widely described as "Christian militia," they are in reality composed of pre-existing village defense groups bolstered by former soldiers loyal to deposed President Bozize, former Seleka fighters, angry youths seeking revenge for Seleka violations, and common criminals.

National elections, which Pope Francis hopes will mark the start of "a new chapter" for the country, are planned for Dec. 27.

CSW's Chief Operating Officer Andy Dipper said, "We applaud Pope Francis' visit to CAR and

his support for peace and interfaith co-operation at a time when ethnic and religious tensions are susceptible to manipulation by armed groups. We echo his calls for disarmament and for peace, which is not only an absence of tension, but is also a positive process of reconciling communities, in which the interfaith efforts will play a vital role. We call upon the international community to support the much needed disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation process that will ultimately lead to the containment of violence in the nation. Ahead of presidential and legislative elections we also call on the UN peacekeeping forces and transitional government to ensure the conditions for a free, fair and peaceful electoral process as part of the transition to democratic rule.”