

FRIDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2011

UGANDA: a communique of the catholic Bishops of Uganda on the current situation in the country

We, the Catholic Bishops from all the 19 dioceses in Uganda gathered here at St. Augustine Institute Nsambya, Kampala, during our second Annual Plenary assembly on the 11th Day of November 2011 have spent time reflecting and interacting among ourselves on the present difficult situation our country is going through today. The problems and the difficulties of today are in part due to past mistakes and omissions and they have created such a complex situation that some people are led to think that it is now very difficult to find a solution. This reminds us of the situation of the people of Israel, described in chapter 1 and 2 of the prophet Baruch, who called upon his people to repent and act in obedience to God's command in order to avoid future and worse disasters. Therefore, as religious leaders and responsible stewards, we feel it our duty to call upon leaders at all levels and all people of good will in our country to take appropriate action on some urgent issues which are facing us, in order to work together for sustainable peace, stability and coexistence.

On Strikes

In the recent past, the country has experienced a number of strikes and demonstrations by various categories of people, from traders to teachers and university students and lecturers. The causes of these strikes are related to the current economic hardships in the country, which up to now have not been adequately addressed, but the strikes are also a symptom of a wider malaise which is linked to a loss of values, increasing frustration and violence.

On this topic, we would like to recall that strike, i.e. withdrawing labour, is a fundamental right provided under Article 40(2)(c) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995 which states that "every worker has a right to withdraw his or her labour according to law".

We are convinced that the current economic situation justifies salary increment, and this should be given priority in the future national planning and budget. We would therefore like to call upon government to continue dialoguing with the teachers and other discontented groups for a sustainable and constructive solution.

On the Oil Sector

We thank God for the gift of oil to our country. It is a precious resource for the good of all the people in Uganda, to be managed in a transparent way, to avoid any form of corruption for the advantage of only a few. We therefore support the efforts by the National Assembly to investigate all cases of corruption and impropriety in the oil sector.

We re-echo resolution No.02 by Parliament "in respect of regularization of the oil sector" to put in place the necessary structures, policy and legislative framework to regulate and manage our oil sector as a priority. Government must be seen to be transparent at all times, especially in important matters of public interest. Democracy works best when the people know what their government is doing. This has not yet been fully adopted in the oil sector.

On Management of Public Resources

In June 2011, we raised our voices and warned against the selective prosecution of public officers who misuse public funds. Up to now, government has not yet done enough to recover tax payer's money. We therefore recommend that more stringent measures be put in place to promote social accountability especially in the public service, where national resources seem to be benefiting only a few people.

We further recommend that public officers who are consistently linked to corruption scandals be relieved of their duties in the interest of the common good.

On the Public Order Management Bill, 2011

We are also concerned about the recently tabled Public Order Management Bill 2011. There are many voices coming from the general public complaining that some provisions of the Bill are inconsistent with the national Constitution as per Article 20(1) which states *inter alia* that “the fundamental human rights and freedoms are inherent and not granted by the State”.

The Executive should also be mindful of Article 29 which further guarantees freedom of expression, speech, movement and assembly. From our assessment, the Bill gives the Police too wide and unnecessary powers to control and regulate public assemblies, not in keeping with a free and democratic society.

In our view therefore, the Bill raises pertinent human rights concerns and it would have a negative impact on the work of civil society organizations, political parties and individuals if it is passed by Parliament in its current form.

On the Right to Bail

There have been a number of proposals, especially from the Executive arm of Government, to alter the conditions for bail from what is currently provided under Article 23 of the Constitution 1995. This article provides that a person arrested in respect of a criminal offence is entitled to apply to the court to be released on bail, and that the court may grant the same on such conditions as the court considers reasonable.

We also maintain that we should not attempt to violate the legal principles entailed in Article 28 (3) of the constitution which protects the right to a fair hearing. Presumption of innocence still remains a key principle in criminal justice.

Conclusion

As we issue this statement, we recall the words of Peter to the early Christian community: ” Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards, responsible for all these varied graces of God, put it at the service of others” (1Pt 4:10).

Indeed, the future of our country and the wellbeing of all its citizens, particularly the poor and most needy, will depend on the commitment of each one of us today. Let us join hands to build, with God’s help, a better future for Uganda.

On behalf of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda,

Signed

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+John Baptist Odama

**Archbishop of Gulu &
Chairman Uganda Episcopal Conference
Kampala - Thursday, November 11, 2011**