



AFRICA/CONGO DR - Easter attack in Mbandaka: Archbishop gives Fides his testimony

Kinshasa (Agenzia Fides) – "The rebels came while the parishes of the Archdiocese were celebrating Easter Mass. It was a sudden attack, which took everyone by surprise," says Archbishop Joseph Kumuondala Mbimba of Mbandaka, the capital of the Equatorial Province in the northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo, which was attacked on Easter Sunday, April 4, by a group of rebels.

"The rebels had specific objectives for conquering: the Provincial Assembly (the local parliament), the residence of the Governor (in Kinshasa), and the airport," said the Archbishop. The army and national police seem to have been caught off guard, allowing the rebels to achieve their goals, including the airport. In the hours after the attack, the Congolese Army with the support of the "Blue Helmets" MONUC (UN Mission in Congo), led a counterattack that forced the rebels to escape.

"The fighting went on until April 5, causing several casualties, certainly among the military but also among civilians, who were hit without too many scruples during the counterattack of the army. However, I am not sure how many deaths there were among the ranks of the rebels," says Archbishop Kumuondala Mbimba.

The group that attacked Mbandaka came across the Congo River, having seized a civilian vessel, probably coming from the area of Bomongo and Mankanza, located some 220 km north of Mbandaka. In February, these two places had been attacked by Enyele rebels. The Enyele and other locals, the Monzaya, have been in conflict for some time over certain bodies of water with great abundance of fish. In 2009, the tension between the two communities culminated in a confrontation that forced thousands to flee.

The Congolese press, however, said that the group that attacked Mbandaka was well armed and organized and probably responded to local and foreign commands (the rebels also had satellite phones). According to Archbishop Kumuondala Mbimba, "among the rebels there were Enyele, but among them were also former military who could handle the weapons well. The attackers also seemed well controlled."

The Easter attack caused great emotion in the country, which is preparing to celebrate 50 years of independence. On 8 April, President Joseph Kabila visited Mbandaka to preside over the Security Council and to show that the state controls the situation. But the local press wonders if the assault of Mbandaka airport was part of a plan to send in more rebel troops, even from neighboring countries. Mbandaka is 700 km from Kinshasa, the capital: both cities border the Congo River, the largest waterway in the country. The attack also comes amidst a heated debate in Parliament on the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping mission of MONUC. The non-consoling result of the efforts of the national army, which was able to regain control of Mbandaka only thanks to the support of UN soldiers, is likely to delay the withdrawal of international peacekeepers. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 9/4/2010)