



AFRICA/MALI - In Gao the church and the Caritas local office were destroyed, the 200 remaining Christians fear for their fate

Bamako (Agenzia Fides) - Caritas Mali says its local office in Gao in northern Mali was destroyed along with the local church after Tuareg rebels seized the city at the weekend. This was reported by Caritas Mali in a statement sent to Fides.

Despite the conflict in the north and a military coup last month, Caritas Mali says its operations providing desperately needed food aid to the rest of the country continue.

The Tuareg rebels have seized three regional capitals in as many days. The main rebel group is the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). They are operating alongside the Islamist group Ansar Edine and Al Quida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI). According to press reports, in recent hours the Islamic militants have thrown the men of the MNLA out from the conquered positions in Timbuktu and other places.

Fr. Jean-Jacques, director of Caritas Gao said: "Caritas staff fled Gao on Saturday evening, March 31 after learning that some Islamic rebel groups were hunting priests and religious to kill them. On Saturday afternoon, the rebels who were thrown out from the city grouped together to then conquer Gao, abandoned by the armed forces. We have been informed that the centre and the church compound have been destroyed. We have also received calls from the small Catholic community left in Gao. They are now hiding, fearing for their lives. There are about 200 Catholics in Gao".

The capital of Mali is calm. "is normal here in Bamako," said Theodore Togo, the Secretary General of Caritas Mali. "We are monitoring the situation in the north. We were forced to discontinue our operations not only in Gao, but also in Mopti, but they continue in the rest of the Country, to assist the people affected by the food crisis."

Mali Caritas is distributing corn, millet, rice and sorghum, as well as seeds to over 100,000 people affected by a growing food crisis. "If the rebels limit their activities to the north, then the majority of our aid programs will be able to continue as planned," concluded Theodore Togo. (LM) (Agenzia Fides 04/03/2012)