



AFRICA/SOUTH SUDAN - Malakal, a city of 250,000 inhabitants, completely deserted after the rebel attacks: the testimony of a missionary to Fides

Juba (Agenzia Fides) - "Malakal, a city of 250,000 inhabitants, is completely deserted. Although our safety was guaranteed, staying there would have been completely useless, because we would not have had anyone to assist" says to Fides Agency Sister Elena Balatti, a Comboni missionary who has just arrived in Juba from Malakal, at the center of clashes between government troops and rebels loyal to former Vice President Riek Machar. "The rebels are the only ones present" says Sister Helen and explains that "Malakal has been attacked three times by the rebel forces of Riek Machar: on Christmas Eve, on January 14 and February 18. After each attack the inhabitants gradually abandoned the city. Many are refugees in neighboring villages, others headed to the north of the State, some even to Sudan. A limited number of people have found refuge in Juba, the capital, reachable only by air. Finally, there are still 20,000 displaced persons who have been welcomed in the UN camp near the town". The missionary describes a gloomy picture: "the city was destroyed. I still recall the image of the city market with Christmas decorations, shortly before the attack on December 24. Now the market no longer exists. All government facilities were looted and set on fire".

Sister Elena reports crimes committed against civilians by the rebels: "Violence against women has become a very common crime, especially in the last attack. Before taking the plane to Juba I brought a 12-year-old girl who was part of a group of 9 young girls who had been raped in the church of Christ the King to the Red Cross hospital. According to the testimonies of people who had taken refuge in the church, on the evening of 25 February, the rebels came to kidnap the 9 girls three times".

"In the last attack - continues the religious - the few remaining inhabitants, who had found refuge in churches spared from previous attacks, saw the rebels attack places of worship. In particular, the men of the so-called 'White Army' entered directly in the churches, as well as in the hospital and orphanage, because they were the only places still to loot and where to find people on whom to exercise their revenge. Some people were killed in the churches".

Sister Helen explains the decision to abandon the city: "We were the last three Comboni Sisters left. After our home was ransacked, we did not have a place where to live. We stayed, along with the local priests, until a small part of the population still remained in Malakal. Now that they have fled, we too have abandoned Malakal with the last group of people, because there was no reason to stay in a deserted city".

Despite the ceasefire agreements signed in Addis Ababa, fighting continues. "The rebels have said they aim to conquer the oil fields of the Upper Nile which are the only ones that still work at full capacity. We pray that an agreement is reached that puts an end to the fighting, as a first step for peace", concludes the missionary. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 03/03/2014)