

Kenya may see more interreligious strife, experts insist

October 17, 2013

NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS)—While the smoke that hung over the Westgate Shopping Mall has dissipated, a quiet tension still lingers in the air throughout Kenya’s capital.

Last month’s attack by al-Shabab militants on a mall frequented by Westerners in Nairobi left at least 67 dead.



A helicopter hovers over the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi during the terrorist attack. (Wikipedia image)Arson at a Christian church in the majority-Muslim city Mombasa just two weeks later suggests the nation is on the precipice of more conflict between Christians and Muslims—a particularly dispiriting development in a country that has enjoyed relative peace between the two religions that dominate the region.

“I am afraid that now, Muslims will attack more, and the Christians will arm themselves and fight back,” said Paul Komu, a truck driver and

Christian who was driving near Westgate when the attacks occurred.

Kenya is predominantly Christian, with Muslims making up about 11 percent of its population, mostly along the Somali border, its coastal region, and in cities such as Mombasa.

John L. Allen Jr., author of *The Global War on Christians*, wrote that just as Africa is the pacesetter for Christian and Muslim growth, it also has become one of the primary fronts for Christian-Muslim conflict, although not always in Kenya. For years, Kenya has been a refuge for people fleeing strife in other parts of the continent.



Christians from throughout Mombasa gather to support the Salvation Army church after it was set on fire during riots Oct. 4. (Salvation Army Mombasa Central Band Facebook Photo) But Christian mission agencies such as the Mission Network report incidents of persecution pouring over the Kenyan border with Somalia. Mombasa is a flashpoint for conflict, and foreign militants and terror groups have wreaked havoc in the past—as was the case with the 1998 al-Qaida bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi.

To a large extent, day-to-day relations between the Muslims and Christians have been amicable.

“For a long time we have had peace with Christians in this country,” said Jamal Faroole, a Somali Muslim living in Nairobi.

Likewise, David Ongwaye, a Lutheran pastor in Kebirigo, Kenya, said while there has been more political correctness than practical cooperation, “There was no thought that Muslims were plotting to cause mayhem.”

Now, sentiments have shifted.



“The human mind gets suspicious,” Faroole said. “People were already suspicious of Somali Muslims, and now I fear it will only get worse.”

Targeting non-Muslims in the mall attack was particularly unsettling, Ongwaye said. During the siege, the attackers demanded Muslims identify themselves and leave the scene.

“The incident at Westgate has, in my opinion, rendered Christians more vulnerable to the Muslims, and as such, any future ecumenism will be met with caution. It was very clear that those hostages who would recite the shahada were saved from the bullet,” he said, referring to the Muslim profession of faith.

Newton Kahumbi Maina, an expert in Christian-Muslim relations at Kenyatta University, said competition for converts, education and politics have exacerbated and preserved a centuries-long conflict.

Notwithstanding history and the fact that suspicion and outright trepidation grip the country, most Kenyans on both sides said they do not want to see escalating violence. Some even struck a hopeful tone.

“Somali and Kenyan Muslims are still our cousins,” Komu said, “Borders can divide us, but we are still extended family.”

Ongwaye, who said he was going to visit a Muslim friend on the coast, said from his Christian perspective, the mandate of Jesus to love one’s neighbor—which both Muslims and Christians can embrace—becomes more relevant than ever.