

Assistance sought for displaced people in Congo

November 20, 2012

WASHINGTON—Baptists in Goma, in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, appealed to the Baptist World Alliance to help people displaced by the conflict in their country.

Baptists in Goma informed the BWA Nov. 20 their city was in the hands of the March 23 Movement, a rebel group that had been advancing on the provincial capital from North Kivu several weeks.

“I can confirm that the town is under the control of rebels,” Mike Musafiri, director of development and relief ministry for the Community of Baptist Church in Eastern Congo, reported to the BWA.

Christians were unable to gather for worship on Nov. 18 due to the intensity of the fighting, Musafiri reported.

“It was not possible to reach the church due to the bombs and gunshots between the rebels and the regular army,” he said.

Describing conditions in Goma, he added, “The humanitarian situation is pitiful.”

Many residents of Goma, including people living in internally displaced camps, have crossed the border into Rwanda seeking safe haven.

Pascal Ndiwokubwimana, aid and development director of the Union of Baptist Churches in Congo, said that the Kanyaruchinya IDP camp—which housed about 16,000 displaced families—had been emptied as its residents were told to leave.

On Nov. 18, a female resident of the camp—about 10 kilometers north of Goma—informed him police and camp administrators told residents on loudspeakers to leave the camp as M23 rebel fighters advanced toward Goma, he said. As the panic-stricken people fled, many families were divided in the process, she said, noting she had been separated from three of her eight children.

Several Baptist churches served as shelters for residents and internally displaced people, including Hekima Baptist Church, which housed up to 150 people. Many were from the Kanyaruchinya camp, as well as residents from areas in and around Goma, such as Kibati, Kanyandja and Munigi.

Baptist families also are housing displaced people. Musafiri is housing two displaced families at his home.

The March 23 Movement was formed in April when several hundred soldiers turned against the armed forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, citing poor conditions in the army and the unwillingness of the government to implement an agreement signed on March 23, 2009.

That agreement, from which the group took its name, integrated the National Congress for the Defense of the People into Democratic Republic of the Congo's armed forces.

An estimated 5.4 million people have died as a result of the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1998.

The nation has the second-largest Baptist membership in Africa, with more than 2.1 million members in 15 BWA member organizations.