



PROCMURA MEETS RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC TO ADVOCATE FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION



BANGUI, 22 - 27 JULY 2013

1.0 Introduction

The Seleka rebels *coup d'état* that overthrew François Bozizé's government on March 24, 2013, and the assumption of office by the Coup Leader now President Michel Djotodia, put PROCMURA's planned Christian and Muslim religious leaders conference on conflict prevention and peace for development scheduled for April in Bangui on hold. However, just as we were at the verge of turning our attention somewhere else, we received what in biblical terms could be described as "A Macedonian Call". For our Muslim Brothers and Sisters and all who may read this but are less conversant with the phrase, it is generally speaking, "an urgent call for help."

The call came from Christian and Muslim religious leaders of the Central African Republic through the Faith, Culture and Education Network (Réseau Foi, Culture et Education – RFCE-RCA) a catholic organisation whose director is Dr. Boris Modeste Yakoubou. Dr. Yakoubou and Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, President of the Islamic Council in the Central African Republic participate in PROCMURA's programmes and are indeed familiar with PROCMURA's interventions across Africa. The urgency of their call was precipitated by the reality on the ground where the political turbulence was fast succeeding to polarise Christians and Muslims along their respective religious affiliations.

Christian and Muslim religious particularism in the country was capitalised on by extremist elements who tried to whip up emotions of a 'Christian President Bozizé overthrown by a Muslim rebel leader Djotodia (now president) who will usher in Muslim rule'. The situation, we were informed, was not helped by the large numbers of mercenaries from neighbouring countries who fought alongside the rebels, and how (comparatively) many church properties and some mosques were vandalised.

PROCMURA was called upon to use its experience in dealing with intractable politico-religious conflicts to assist the Christian and Muslim religious leaders in their stated commitment and determination to stick together in the midst of the volatile situation. We were also to seek audience with the new government to appeal to them to curb the excesses and the seeming mayhem that was developing; to demonstrate by word and deed that religion and religious affiliation was not the determinant factor that ushered in the new government.

2.0 The "How-To-Get-There" Question and How We Managed To Get There

When we received the "Macedonian Call" our commitment and enthusiasm to do so appeared to be hampered by the "how-to-get-there" question. Our travel agents informed us that Kenya Airways had suspended its flights to Bangui after the Seleka Rebels took over power. Guided by our Christian conviction that if God wills we will find a way to get there and by conventional wisdom that suggests that "where there is a will, there is a way", we explored several avenues and finally found out that Ethiopian Airways will help us to get there if we were prepared to take a winding air route with several stops and change of air carriers. In short, we left Nairobi by Ethiopian Airways on the early hours of Sunday July 24 to Addis Ababa where we change planes and continued to Malabo, the capital city of Equatorial Guinea and then to Douala, Cameroon.

3.0 My Suitcase Failed to Arrive

From Douala, we boarded a smaller aircraft belonging to Asky Airlines and landed in Bangui M’Poko Airport on Sunday, July 21 at 20.00hrs local time. This marked the end of our 12 hours journey from Nairobi to Bangui – a journey that under normal circumstances would take just over four hours by direct flight. Upon arrival, Dr. Yakoubou received and welcomed us to the land of “Zo Kwe Zo”. My suitcase failed to arrive. Promises of getting it the following day failed. It arrived five (5) days later on Friday, 26th July.

The delay in the arrival of my suitcase left us with no option but to buy everything from top to bottom to make me look decent and presentable during my courtesy calls on religious and political leaders. My colleague, Paul Mwalavu, the PROCMURA Bilingual Assistant who accompanied me in the trip was not directly affected by the failure of suitcases to arrive since he travelled light and could therefore carry his belongings as hand luggage. We were also pleased to have carried all our resource materials as hand luggage. After a short briefing by Dr. Yakoubou on our arrival at the Bangui JM Residence Hotel, a full briefing on the situation on the ground and what to expect was presented to us by the organising Committee on the morning of July 22.

4.0 Consultations with Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders - July 22-23

After the briefing, the committee arranged a car for us to hire to help us move around for consultations and meetings. They also arranged for an interpreter who would assist me while Paul, the PROCMURA bilingual assistant took notes of the discussions.

As programmed, we began our consultation with the three main religious leaders in the country on the late morning of July 22 through to July 23.

4.1 Visit and Consultation with the President of the Association of Evangelical Churches (AEC) in the Central African Republic

Our first call of the day (July 22) was to the President of AEC, Pastor Nicolas Guerékoyame Gbangou who is also the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) executive committee member and their representative in the Central African Republic. He warmly received us



From right to left; Dr. Boris Yakoubou, Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah, Pastor Nicolas Guerékoyame; President of AEA in Central African Republic and Mr. Gaspard Mamang(intepreter) at the AEC offices

and briefed us on the tricky situation on the ground. He also informed us of how the Archbishop of Bangui, Mgr. Dieudonné Nzapalainga, and the President of the Islamic council in the Central African Republic, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, and himself had to travel to areas around the country where the situation on the aftermath of the overthrow of the previous government had created some amount of animosity between sections of the Christian and Muslim communities.

He assured us of the commitment and determination of the three (3) religious leaders to work together towards the prevention of an all-out conflict between Christians and Muslims and their collective resolve to work harder to promote peace and reconciliation in the country.

Pastor Gbangou praised PROCMURA for coming to them at this time of great need and assured the General Adviser that the number of participants allocated to the Alliance of the Evangelical Churches to participate in the two day conference will be filled by those who will help them to make an impact on the ground.

4.2 Courtesy Call and Consultation with the Catholic Archbishop of Bangui



Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah with the Archbishop of Bangui, Mgr. Dieudonné Nzapalainga.

Our next stop of the day was courtesy call and consultation with the Archbishop of Bangui, Mgr. Dieudonné Nzapalainga. The Archbishop was generous in providing us with detailed information and analysis of the immediate, past and present situation. He availed to us pastoral letters and statements of the Catholic fraternity countrywide, and documented appeals to government on the situation in the country.

He made specific reference to the Economic Community of the Central African States (ECCAS) ultimatum given to the Head of State, Michel Djotodia to return the country to democratic governance within 18 months. He made it clear that this road-map had helped calm down the situation and restored some uneasy ease in the country. He was resolute in his analysis that if the 18 months deadline was not met, tension was likely to boil up to uncontrollable levels the outcome of which will be anybody's guess.

On relations between the different religious groups, the archbishop serialized high profile meetings among the 3 religious leaders of the Catholics, Protestants and Muslims and emphasised that they are solidly united to ensure that they prevent religious conflicts around the country. "We will continue to speak out (with one voice) on situations where human rights may be violated".

He praised PROCMURA for its work on peace between Christians and Muslims in Africa and for braving it to come to the Central African Republic at this time when many other organisations leadership that have peace as part of their focus would rather send messages than come themselves.

On the PROCMURA initiated Christian and Muslim religious leaders message that was sent to the factions during the political negotiations (see Attachment Document Two) the Archbishop said, “let the Christian and Muslim religious leaders around Africa and especially those who signed the appeal for peace message to the Central African Republic during the Maroua Conference early this year, know that we are doing our best together under very difficult circumstances to prevent outright conflict and restore peace and unity among the people”.

4.3 Courtesy Call and Consultation with the President of the Islamic council in the Central African Republic

On the morning of July 23, the General Adviser completed his courtesy calls and consultations with the three main religious leaders with a call on the President of the Islamic council in the Central African Republic, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama at the council offices. Imam Layama received us with three other religious leaders, one of who was a former minister in the François Bozizé’s government.



Front line from left to right, Joseph Qualité; Vice president of Administrative Council, Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah, Ali ZAORO; President of Administrative Council and meeting and Imam Oumar Kobine, the President of the Islamic Council with Dr. Boris Yakoubou (back right)

The Muslim religious leaders recounted the several military coups that had taken place in the Central African Republic and emphasised that proactive measures by Christian and Muslim religious leaders, prayers, fasting, the spirit of solidarity and nationhood helped the country to avoid outright civil wars and religious conflicts.

Imam Layama on his part, informed us of how mosques were burnt during rampage. He assured us of his commitment to work with Archbishop and the President of the Evangelical Alliance to ensure that there is peace in the land. He provided a catalogue on meetings he has held with imams urging them to ensure that they work for peace and reconciliation in the land.

He praised PROCMURA for building bridges of understanding between Christians and Muslims and for its stated objective of Christian and Muslim constructive engagement with Muslims for peace and peaceful co-existence for the spiritual and physical development of all.

The imam thanked the General Adviser personally for his commitment to peace, and stated that the Maroua statement on peace for the Central Africa which was sent to him while they were negotiating peace for the country in Libreville, Gabon, was very important even if in the end the agreement arrived at in Gabon did not hold. He promised that Muslim leaders shall be attending the PROCMURA conference on peace for development the following day.

5.0 MEETINGS WITH GOVERNMENT MINISTERS

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the objectives of the General Adviser's visit to the Central African Republic was not only to meet the religious leaders and later hold a conference but also to meet government and the political class to listen to them and to drum down the message of peace and reconciliation. We succeeded in doing this by meeting the Minister for Territorial Administration, Decentralisation and Regional Affairs, and the Prime Minister. Excerpts from proceedings of the meeting are hereby presented.

5.1 Meeting with the Minister for Territorial Administration, Decentralisation and Regional Affairs



Hon. Aristide Sokambi welcomes Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah at his office

On the morning of Wednesday July 24th, the General Adviser in the company of Dr. Boris Yakoubou paid a courtesy call to the Minister for Territorial Administration, Decentralisation and Regional Affairs, Hon. Aristide Sokambi at his downtown office. After going through protocol, Dr. Yakoubou informed the minister about the rationale of our visit and the role of PROCMURA as a pan African Christian organisation that advocates for Christian and Muslim cooperation for peace and development in the continent. He recounted PROCMURA's call for conflict prevention during the

Libreville negotiations that fell through, and expressed his gratitude for the new government for granting us visas to come and assist them. This was an important acknowledgement since our visas were issued in Bangui and sent to us by electronic mail to travel to the country. He also informed the minister of the two day conference that PROCMURA was going to organise for Christian and Muslim religious leaders of the country to promote peaceful coexistence and restore good neighbourliness and reconciliation.

The minister acknowledged the efforts by PROCMURA in ensuring that there is peace between the two faiths communities and made it clear that when he heard that the General Adviser of PROCMURA was coming, he researched on the organisation and on the role of the General Adviser in working for peace. He said that he was delighted to learn of an organisation that specialises in Christian-Muslim relations and praised PROCMURA for

the noble cause of bringing Christians and Muslims together to work towards peaceful coexistence.

PROCMURA's commitment, said the minister, was in consonance with the expectations of the government and people of the Central African Republic. He talked about the current crisis in the country and praised Christian and Muslim religious leaders for acting immediately to help stabilise the country.

On His part, the General Adviser highlighted PROCMURA's experience in the continent and decried any situation in any country that Christians and Muslims are not at peace as a recipe for Chaos. He appealed to the government through the minister to provide protection for religious institutions and all other vulnerable institutions and to encourage the religious leaders as they commit themselves to work towards the well-being of the country. He invited the minister to the opening ceremony of the conference.

The minister informed the General Adviser that he already had a prearranged meeting but will be sending someone from his office to participate in the opening ceremony and to read a message from him. He also assured the General Adviser that he will be briefing the Prime Minister of his presence and the message that he brings along. Also, he will inform him of the important conference for the religious leaders which PROCMURA is organising.

Dr. Mbillah thanked the minister for granting him audience and promised that PROCMURA shall accompany the people of the Central African Republic as they work for peace and reconciliation.



Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah (second right) with Hon. Aristide Sokambi (second left); Minister for Territorial Administration and Decentralisation at his offices accompanied by Dr. Boris Yakoubou (left) and Gaspard Mamang (right)

5.2 Meeting with the Prime Minister



H.E Nicolas Tiangaye welcomes Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah at his office

On the morning of Thursday July 15 when the conference had begun, we received information that the Prime Minister, His Excellency Nicolas Tiangaye was ready to meet the General Adviser. After the opening ceremony of the conference which the General Adviser outlined its rationale and objectives we sought leave of the dignitaries to make a courtesy call on the Prime Minister. Just about the time that we were about to set off, participants were found rushing to the nearest radio around - the president of the country was announcing new appointments to his cabinet. One of the announcements was the reappointed of His Excellency Nicolas

Tiangaye as Prime Minister of the country.

Accompanied by Mgr. Dieudonné Nzapalainga the Archbishop of Bangui, Imam Oumar Kobine, President of the Islamic Council in the CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou; President of the Association of Evangelical Churches in the Central African Republic, we paid a courtesy call to the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister warmly welcomed us to his office. Pastor Nicolas Guerékoyame who was nominated by his colleague religious leaders to say a word on their behalf, began by congratulating the Prime Minister on his reappointment. He then told the Prime Minister that they had come with a Ghanaian guest who lives and works in Kenya and that Dr. Boris Yakoubou will introduce us and tell him of our mission.

Dr. Boris made the introductions and outlined the purpose for our coming to the country. He told the Prime Minister that the invitation to PROCMURA by Religious leaders through the Réseau Foi, Culture et Education (RFCE) of which he is the head, to come to the Central African Republic to assist in the conflict prevention, peace and reconciliation agenda was because PROCMURA remains the voice of reason and appeal for African Christians and Muslims to cooperate and collaborate for the spiritual and material development of the continent. PROCMURA's expertise in bringing Christians and Muslims together to work towards conflict prevention and the promotion of peace and development is unrivalled, concluded Dr. Yakoubou. He then invited Dr. Mbillah to elaborate on what PROCMURA is and its mission.

Dr. Mbillah began his brief address by congratulating the Prime Minister on his reappointment. He then provided a briefing on PROCMURA's work in Africa through its constituencies in a total of thirty (30) countries. He talked about the PROCMURA's vision of a continent where Christians and Muslims in spite of their religious differences work towards the holistic development of the spiritual and material development of the continent. The General Adviser made it clear that if Christians and Muslims in any country became the best of friends and work towards the well-being of such a country, there will be peace and development in the country. On the other hand if the two religious groups

who currently form the majority of Africa's religious landscape became the worst of enemies the continent will not have peace.

Turning his attention to the specific situation in the Central African Republic Dr. Mbillah indicated that PROCMURA's role in the current situation was to assist both Christian and Muslim religious leaders to drum down the message that the Central African Republic was for all Central Africans and that religious diversity (in this particular case Christianity and Islam) should not be seen as divisive of society but a unifying force in the situation of adversity as currently experienced. In other words, PROCMURA's role was to reiterate and emphasise the role of Christianity and Islam and for that matter Christian and Muslim religious leaders as agents for conflict prevention, restoration of peace, and the promotion of reconciliation.

He implored the Prime Minister to do all within his influence and power to ensure that the current political situation does not in any way assume a religious colouring or worse still polarise the population along religious lines.

In his update of the situation on the ground, His Excellency Nicolas Tiangaye first acknowledged PROCMURA's efforts in the quest for peace and reconciliation in the country. He informed the General Adviser that he was in the peace negotiating team that met in Libreville, Gabon, and acknowledged that they received PROCMURA's message from Maroua and were very much encouraged that Christians and Muslims around Africa are concerned about the well-being of their country. He told the General Adviser to inform those who participated in the Maroua conference that their message was well received and continues to be a point of reference when they talk about cooperation between Christians and Muslims in the country.



From left to right Dr. Boris Yakoubou, Mgr. Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah, HE. Nicolas Tiangaye, Pastor Nicolas Guerékoyame-Gbangou , Imam Oumar Kobine and Mr. Gaspard Mamang

The Prime Minister told the General Adviser that the country had suffered loss of lives and destruction of properties that shook its national fabric. He praised Mgr. Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Imam Oumar Kobine and Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou for their tireless efforts to see a return to calm and dignity in the country.

For the Prime Minister, those who are responsible for violence, killings, looting, abductions and destruction were criminals who they are working tirelessly to deal with. He called for a spirit of tolerance and emphasised that as political leaders they were determined to ensure that sanity prevails and as quickly as possible restore peace in the country. He promised the General Adviser that they will leave no stone unturned in their determination to restore order and avoid violations of the human rights of the people.

With these words the Rev. Dr. Mbillah was asked to pray for the country and all people of goodwill to team up together to ensure that peace returns to the country as soon as possible, as they set up the road map to a return to democratic governance.



The Archbishop of Bangui, Mgr. Dieudonné Nzapalainga being interviewed by the local media after meeting with the Prime Minister.

6.0 Meeting the Media and Sending Peace Messages to the Country

After formal meeting with Prime Minister we were then 'gladly ambushed' by the media outside the PM's office to speak to the nation in Sango (the national language) and French on messages of peace and reconciliation and to respond to concerns in the country. The three religious leaders responded appropriately.

Prepared by the PROCMURA Team.