



On Sunday Pope Francis announced that Friday the first full week of Lent would be a day of prayer and fasting for peace given the many ongoing conflicts throughout the world, particularly those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan.

“Facing the tragic continuation of conflicts in different parts of the world, I invite all the faithful to a special day of prayer and fasting for peace Feb. 23, the Friday of the first week of Lent,” the Pope said Feb. 4.

He asked that the day be offered specifically for the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan and invited both non-Catholics and non-Christians to join “in the ways they deem most appropriate.”

“Our heavenly Father always listens to his children who cry out to him in pain and anguish,” he said, and made a “heartfelt appeal” for each one of us to “hear this cry and, each one according to their own conscience, before God, ask ourselves: ‘What can I do to make peace?’”

While prayer is always an effective resolution, more can be done, Francis said, explaining that each person “can concretely say no to violence to the extent that it depends on him or herself. Because victories obtained with violence are false victories, while working for peace does good for all!”

The Pope's appeal, which he made during his Sunday Angelus address, comes just two months after a Nov. 23 prayer vigil for peace in the two countries.

With plans to visit South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo last year thwarted by ongoing conflict, Pope Francis organized the prayer vigil in order to pray for an end to war in the two countries and to ask for comfort for victims of the violence.

He had planned to visit South Sudan last fall alongside Anglican Primate Archbishop Joseph Welby for an ecumenical trip aimed at promoting peace in the conflict-ridden country. However, due to safety concerns, the visit was postponed until the situation on the ground stabilizes.

South Sudan has been in the middle of a brutal civil war for the past three-and-a-half years, which has divided the young country between those loyal to its President Salva

Kiir and those loyal to former vice president Reik Machar. The conflict has also bred various divisions of militia and opposition groups.

Since the beginning of the war, some 4 million citizens have left the violence-stricken country in hopes of finding peace, food and work. In August 2017 Uganda received the one-millionth South Sudanese refugee, highlighting the urgency of the crisis as the world's fastest growing refugee epidemic.

For those who haven't fled the nation, many internally displaced persons (IDPs) have sought refuge in churches for protection from violence. Most IDPs are typically women, children and those who have lost their families in the war.

Many are too fearful to stay in their homes because they know they could be killed, tortured, raped or even forced to fight. And despite successful partnerships between the local Church, aid agencies and the government, refugees in many areas still need a proper supply of food.

On Friday the U.S. banned the export of weapons sales in South Sudan and urged other nations to do the same over growing frustration at the country's inability to put an end to the conflict.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, political unrest first erupted in 2015 after a bill was proposed which would potentially delay the presidential and parliamentary elections. The bill was widely seen by the opposition as a power grab on the part of Kabila.

Relations between the government and the opposition deteriorated further when a Kasai chief was killed last August, after calling on the central government to quit meddling in the territory, insisting it be controlled by the local leaders.

Catholic bishops in the country had helped to negotiate an agreement, which hoped to prevent a renewed civil war by securing an election this year for the successor of President Kabila. However, in January of this year, the bishops said the agreement was expected to fail unless both parties were willing to compromise. In March, the bishops withdrew from mediation talks.

With a history of bloody ethnic rivalries and clashes over resources, fears have developed that the violence in Kasai, a hub for political tension, will spread to the rest of the nation and even lead to the involvement of neighboring countries.

In the past year alone, more than 3,300 people have been killed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Kasai region. The death toll includes civilians caught in the crossfire of a brutal fight between the Congolese army and an opposing militia group.

According to the Guardian, violence in the east of the country in recent weeks has

increased to the extent that last week alone some 7,000 people fled to neighboring Burundi and another 1,200 into Tanzania.

In terms of a humanitarian crisis, the Food and Agriculture Organization last week pointed to an “alarming food insecurity” in the country, due largely to the fact that violence has now spread into areas that were previously considered stable, such as the Kasai and Tanganyika provinces. In the past six months alone, the number of people experiencing extreme hunger has risen by 2 million, rising to about 7.7 million people, which is roughly 10% of the population.

After reflecting on the day's Gospel reading from Mark and leading faithful in praying the Angelus, Pope Francis also offered his prayer and closeness to the people of Madagascar, who were recently hit by a massive cyclone which so far has left at least 51 people dead and has caused extensive damage.