

Church leaders call for tougher mediation measures on Zimbabwe

Bishop Ivan Abrahams, Chair of the South African Church Leaders' Forum and Acting General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, the Reverend Canon Luke Pato called on all political and religious leaders in Southern Africa to be on full alert for a Chinese vessel known to be carrying six containers of weapons and ammunition destined for Zimbabwe.

The vessel has reportedly fled Durban harbour after an interdict by Anglican Bishop of Natal, the Reverend Ruben Phillips and other civil and religious activists preventing the vessel from offloading its cargo in a South African harbour proved successful. Bishop Ivan Abrahams, Chair of the SACC Church Leaders Forum – a Forum representing some 16 million Christians in South Africa - recorded his gratitude to the Diakonia and KwaZulu Natal Councils of Churches for their acts of public and spiritual resistance to a trade protocol that may have – and could still – seriously exacerbate the volatile political situation in Zimbabwe. “The legal challenge by the Durban clerics and their subsequent prayer vigil on Vetcher’s Beach on Saturday are testimony to how law and religion ought to work together for the promotion of justice and peace in the Southern Africa region” said Bishop Abrahams. The SACC General Secretary – currently attending a consultation of Councils of Churches of the Southern Africa region in Mauritius – heaped equal praise on the actions of the South African Transport and Allied Workers’ Union (SATAWU) when he was informed of their decision not to handle the cargo either in port or by road. “These types of interventions nurture my faith and build my pride in being a South African” said Mr. Makue. The crisis in Zimbabwe had been discussed by the Church leaders and he offered - as far as was possible – to raise the matter at the SADC International Conference in Mauritius where Heads of State were due to have met.

In Johannesburg, Canon Luke Pato expressed deep concern at the unannounced election results, reports of increasing violence in Zimbabwe and the ominous presence of the An Yue Jian and its cargo of weapons destined for a volatile situation. “Immediate action must be taken at all levels – by government and civil society including our faith communities - if South Africa is to fulfil its obligation to mediate a peaceful agreement in the region” Canon Pato said.

The general tenor of matters is that the situation in Zimbabwe is very dangerous with levels of conflict escalating. Every citizen in Southern Africa has a moral obligation to play a role in preventing the situation from getting worse for the people of Zimbabwe. The volatile political crisis in Zimbabwe, exacerbated by election results that are as yet unannounced three weeks after voting could be provoked to war should weapons be introduced. “For these reasons” says Rev Pato “ we call for every effort on every front to prevent a port of entry to this vessel and delivery of these weapons.”.

Bishop Ivan Abrahams and Canon Luke Pato were at the time of writing in communication with the leadership of Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISSA) and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). Both expressed confidence in the ability of these organizations to promote the kind of action for justice illustrated by the leadership of Diakonia and KwaZulu Natal Councils of Churches. Should the An Yue Jiang decide to dock in any African port through which Zimbabwe might have access to this cargo of weapons, the organization of the Churches and civil society would be able to emulate the legal and political resistance shown by their faith and community leadership.

The South African Church leaders will also be calling - through the Church organisations in Africa and Southern Africa - for tougher negotiating measures from the AU and the United Nations in order to produce a speedy settlement to the apparent political stalemate in Zimbabwe.

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