In Central African Republic, church members mostly under radar amid coup
Mistaken identity led to beating of pastor in January; unrest subsiding

In Southern Mexico, religious liberty continues to grow despite history of intolerance
Religious freedom festival celebrates progress in recent years

Thousands of Adventist youth march across Brooklyn Bridge against violence
'Compassion Weekend' also sees flash mob in Times Square; prayer for passers-by
Sunday’s mass lootings in the capital of the Central African Republic have not affected Seventh-day Adventist Church operations, but several incidents in recent months have taken a toll on a few church employees amid the ongoing civil war.

The Adventist Church in this landlocked African nation organized a peace procession earlier this month, but in January a mission worker was beaten and a pastor was arrested by rebel soldiers in a case of mistaken identity.

Media reports indicate Central African Republic president President François Bozize fled the country over the weekend, prompting Seleka rebel leader Michel Djotidia to proclaim himself president.

More than a dozen South African troops supporting the president were killed during the rebel takeover of the city, Reuters reported. This is the latest coup d’état in a country known for such leadership transitions since the country gained independence from France in 1960.

James Kouedi, treasurer of the Adventist Church’s Central African Republic Mission, said church members were encouraged to go straight home after worship services on Saturday as rebels moved into the city.

Mission President Gueret Jean Jacques reported that order slowly seems to be returning in the capital city of Bangui, home to some 600,000 people. In a phone interview yesterday, he said there is still minor unrest and some security problems, and electricity and water service have been out since Saturday.

There are more than 10,300 Adventist Church members in the country, served by six pastors and 10 Global Mission pioneers.

The events of recent days have simmered since last year. The Seleka rebellion – meaning “Alliance” or “Solidarity” in the local Sango language – was widespread before a peace agreement was signed with the government in January. The agreement was soon discarded, inciting the current bout of fighting.

Jacques invited church and community members to join a peace procession earlier this month. About 500 joined the mid-day march.

No members have been killed in the conflict, though a few have suffered injuries. In December, in the city of Bambari, the home of Pastor Mavoulet Marious and his family was hit with a rocket and gunfire. No one was harmed.

In January, Marious was arrested after rebel soldiers confused his Adventist Pathfinder outfit for a
government military uniform. He was soon released.

In the city of Sibut, mission pioneer Ngate Benjamin was beaten by rebel soldiers and suffered injuries, including a lost tooth. He was housing a church member serving in the government military. The man learned of the news and surrendered himself to the rebel army to secure Benjamin’s release. Church leaders say the isolated incidents have not otherwise disrupted church activities.

The Adventist Church came to this country in 1960 through the work of missionary Jean Kempf and his wife.

Though the country is very rich with mineral deposits, oil and gems, widespread poverty is a big challenge for evangelism. The mission is not self-sufficient and relies on appropriations. There are fewer pastors than mission pioneers.

In recent years, several students were sent to the Adventist University Cosendai of Nanga Eboko in Cameroon to study theology and education. A few of the mission leaders are taking study programs through the Adventist University of Africa.

Bright spots for the church here include the Adventist College of Bangui, a locally renowned institution offering high school and primary school programs. There are some 500 students enrolled.

Also, the government recently gave the Adventist Church 30 hectares of land for an Adventist University on the outskirts of Bangui, and an additional three hectares for the building of a new union office.

It’s expected that Bangui will be the headquarters of a newly created union administration for the denomination later this year. The union would retain the name “Central Africa Union Mission,” and would also include Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Chad. Cameroon, currently in that union, will become a second union.

In Southern Mexico, religious liberty continues to grow despite history of intolerance

More than 25,000 people attended Saturday’s festival
A large-scale festival of religious liberty here in the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas underscores how freedom of conscience continues to improve in this region with a history of persecution against some religions.

Saturday’s festival of “Friendship and Religious Freedom” brought more than 25,000 people to the Victor Manuel Rayna Stadium in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. The event was also broadcast on Internet radio.

“People in Chiapas know what religious persecution means, they know the costs of following your conscience,” said John Graz, secretary-general of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). “We’re grateful for the progress of religious freedom, where people can choose their faith without resistance.”

Graz later said the event was held to thank the state of Chiapas, its governor, and state authorities for religious freedom.

He said the event was the largest such celebration in the region.

Incidents of intolerance toward those not of the region’s dominant Catholic faith have sharply declined in recent years. As little as a decade ago, the region was still known for persecution of Protestants.

In 2008, ANN visited congregations whose neighbors wouldn’t allow construction of permitted church buildings. In other areas of the state, property was sometimes destroyed or Protestant believers imprisoned for converting from the dominant faith.

In 2011, the IRLA held a forum in Chiapas that brought together 600 people, including pastors, lay members and government officials. Federal and state officials at the forum said laws had recently been enacted to guarantee religious freedom and that full recognition and implementation were soon to come.

At Saturday’s festival, Adventist Church President Ted N. C. Wilson publically offered his personal thanks to the mayor of Tuxtla Gutierrez for allowing event organizers to facilitate the ceremony in the city.
“We are so grateful to the authorities of the government and all peoples of good will for the religious freedom you enjoy,” Wilson said. “God asks us not only in Chiapas but around the world to promote and foster freedom of conscience.”

There are 218,000 Adventist Church members in Chiapas. Last year, the Adventist Church in Mexico created a fifth administrative union in the country – the Chiapas Mexican Union Mission – to accommodate and manage the growing membership.

**Thousands of Adventist youth march across Brooklyn Bridge against violence**

*Adventist youth march across the Brooklyn Bridge on Saturday March 23 in a call for compassion and an end to violence. [photos by Dawin Rodriguez]*

*More than 3,000 Adventist youth and supporters attended the rally that began in Brooklyn and ended in lower Manhattan.*
Mar. 29, 2013
Brooklyn, New York, United States
Kimi-Roux James/ANN staff

More than 3,000 Seventh-day Adventist youth and supporters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge in New York last Saturday in a demonstration calling for compassion and an end to violence.

Each participant wore a red and white t-shirt depicting a hand forming the shape of a heart sign. The t-shirt slogan read: “Compassion: Because Actions Speak Louder Than Words.”

The event was part of a three-day “Compassion Weekend” youth and community service rally sponsored by the Adventist Church. The march was preceded by a press conference in Brooklyn’s Cadman Plaza and drew church leaders and government representatives.

“Today, we would like to call on the leaders … the families, the schools and the churches of New York City to begin a movement of compassion,” said Jose Cortez Jr., Youth Ministries director for the Adventist Church’s Atlantic Union.

“It is our resolve to take this movement across the Northeast of our country and have it replicated across the world by other Adventist youth and young adults,” he said.

U.S. Congresswoman and Brooklyn native Yvette Clarke, who represents New York’s 9th District, commended the Seventh-day Adventist church for urging young people to demonstrate compassion based on what they learn in their congregations.

“This march is about people understanding that violence is not the answer; that we can disagree without being violent; that we can resolve conflict without causing harm, death and impairment; that through love, through compassion, all violence can be overcome,” Clarke said at the conference.

Participants marched across the bridge into Manhattan and stopped in front of City Hall to briefly pray for New York City and government officials. They continued to march through lower Manhattan and ended at Foley Square.

Separately, Ricardo Bain, pastor of the Queens Faith Temple, led a group of some 400 Adventist youth in conducting a flash mob in Times Square. Participants emerged from crowds to chant the words, “I am the hands of Jesus; I share the love of Jesus”, along with singing “O, How I Love Jesus.” The mob ended with youth disbursing into small groups to pray with passers-by.

Atlantic Union President Don King said the event is a precursor to more than 400 evangelistic meetings that will take place in and around New York City over the next eight months. The meetings are part of the Adventist Church’s NY13 initiative to reach urban areas with the gospel.
The Compassion Weekend in New York City is the first in a series of annual rallies for the Adventist Church in the Northeast. Upcoming rallies are scheduled for Portland, Maine, in 2014; Hamilton, Bermuda, in 2015; Worcester, Massachusetts, in 2016; and Syracuse, New York, in 2017. For more information, visit compassion-now.org.

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