



**Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace**

**Backgrounder on the Pilgrimage of Peace to the
Democratic Republic of the Congo**

Early last month the Holy Father Pope Francis renewed his commitment to visit the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan in early February 2023. He had scheduled to visit these two countries in Africa in the summer of last year but had to abandon those plans due to his health.

Pope Francis' visit to the DRC comes under the motto of "All Reconciled in Jesus Christ". The DRC is home to the largest Catholic community in the world. Of the 87 million people in the DRC 96% are Christian, half of which are Catholic while the other half adhere to the various Protestant Church denominations. The Catholic Church is not only the biggest denomination in the Congo, since independence the Church has been the most cohesive and impactful institution in the country second only to the government. The Church's health and education structures are the best and exist in areas where even the government is not present. The Church's peace and justice, natural resource, and electoral monitoring programs are often the only institutions to hold the government accountable for its corruption and repression.

Pope Francis is keenly aware of the long history of repression, conflict, corruption, and the illegal exploitation of the country's vast natural resources. When he canceled his trip to the Congo last year he said, "I think of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the exploitation, violence and insecurity from which it suffers, particularly in the east of the country, where armed conflicts continue to cause much intense suffering, aggravated by the indifference and the convenience of many."

In that same address Pope Francis laid out his message for this trip. "You have a great mission, all of you, beginning with your political leaders: it is that of *turning a page* in order to blaze new trails, new paths of reconciliation and forgiveness, of serene coexistence and of development. It is a mission that you must take together. A mission that entails looking to the future, looking to the many young people in your lands, so rich in promise and yet so troubled, in order to offer them a brighter future... For their sake, above all, it is necessary to lay down arms, to overcome all resentment, and to write new pages of fraternity."

In his first meeting in the Congo, Pope Francis will deliver this message to the President of the DRC Felix Tshisekedi. President Tshisekedi came to power in 2019 when the outgoing President Kabila overturned the results of the 2018 elections and named Tshisekedi the winner. During that election the Catholic Church partnering with the Carter Center fielded 40,000 election monitors and declared that the results announced by President Kabila did not match the results they had collected. Shortly

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thereafter, it was revealed that the Church's results matched the results from the official national electoral commission.

President Tchisekedi is running this year for re-election and already eleven months before elections are due, preparations for the elections are behind schedule. Worse still, there are reports that he and his government will use the ongoing violence in the East as a reason to postpone elections while he continues to rally support around his candidacy. The Church in the Congo (CENCO) now allied with the Protestant Churches (ECC) is calling for timely, free, fair, and transparent elections. CENCO will again field tens of thousands of electoral monitors for this year's elections. CENCO and the ECC are planning a mission to the United States in April this year to encourage the United States to join them to ensure free and fair elections, peace across the country and an end to corruption that steals the country's resources. This visit follows a mission to Washington in November of 2021 where the Church notified American leader the 2023 electoral process had started and called the United States to join CENCO and the ECC to ensure that the voice of the people will be heard and respected.

True to his concern for young people and those suffering from the conflict and illegal and corrupt mining in Eastern Congo, Pope Francis will meet with a select group of young people and representatives from Eastern Congo.

Most importantly, Pope Francis will meet with the faithful and the leaders of the Catholic Church. He will hold an open-air mass on the second day of his visit for the people of Kinshasa, a city that is home to over 16 million people. He will hold a meeting with priests, consecrated people and seminarians and with his brothers in the Congolese Jesuit community.

Pope Francis' visit to the Congo will certainly be a national event that will focus the attention of all Congolese in and out of the country. His presence, his speeches will be followed and watched from start to finish. This trip will mobilize and energize the Catholic and Protestant churches and their faithful. His support for peace, reconciliation and good governance will echo in the country well past his departure from the country and will strengthen the Catholic Church's work. Certainly, government leaders will follow his every word. The Church hopes that this will reinforce the country's efforts to build a peaceful and prosperous country and in the immediate term, lead to free and fair elections and a new legitimate government that will respect the will of the people.

The Church in the United States has partnered with the Church in the Congo for decades and will continue during this crucial electoral period. We support CENCO's call to the United States Government to support free and fair elections as the essential first step to establishing democracy, good governance and building the common good.

Let's be praying for Pope Francis's apostolic visits to DRC and South Sudan, click here to learn more from our [Renewed Call to Solidarity with Africa](#) document and to the [DRC page on our website](#).

RESOURCES: Visit: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/international-justice-and-peace>. Contact: *Steve Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, shilbert@usccb.org, 202-541-3149.

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