

---

## The Pope to visit DR Congo and South Sudan: prophecy (and expected miracles) of Bergoglio's visit

"I am familiar with the village of Chegera in Buhumba, north of Goma, where the Pope will celebrate Holy Mass during his visit to Congo. It's very close to where we live. Let us hope that everything goes well... Preparations are in full swing and we are looking forward to welcoming the Holy Father in a spirit of deep faith. There is great joy for his visit." However, there are also concerns. For an instant, those concerns cross the mind of **Antonina Lo Schiavo** during her phone conversation with us from Goma. The *fidei donum* missionary witnessed first-hand the tormented events of the past fifty years in the greater Congo, including the decolonisation from Belgian authorities to eventually become an independent (and neo-colonised) State. "The Pope (who will return to Africa on July 2-7, *ed.'s note*) will be coming here to be among the people, to look them in the eye! We do hope that things will change: the Holy Father will meet us in person, also we missionaries are organising the ceremonial", says Antonina. Chegera is the village in whose outskirts Ambassador Luca Attanasio was killed in the ambush on the UN convoy on 22 February 2021. **The road of Attanasio.** Francis will be arriving 15 kilometres north of Goma, in the village situated along Goma-Rutshuru, the route where Ambassador Attanasio's convoy was ambushed with Carabinieri officer Vittorio Iacovacci and their driver Moustapha Milambo. The day of our phone conversation with Antonina Lo Schiavo is also the day when the *Baromètre sécuritaire* du Kivu (a security monitoring project in the east of the country developed by Human Rights Watch) breaks the news of the resumption of hostilities in Rutshuru, North Kivu. "On the morning of March 28, M23 militia attacked the government army in the three villages of in Runyoni, Chanzu, and Ndiza. Residents are fleeing to Uganda" writes *Baromètre*. The neighbouring country is welcoming the displaced Congolese, although the same Ugandan troops have infiltrated the warring militias. All the Goma region, in Kivu, is facing "a massive bloodbath." The intensification of guerrilla warfare that is unregulated and has no apparent motivation (other than the conquest of its rich mineral resources and seizing power - it is referred to as the "Balkanisation" of Congo), is undermining the lives of civilians. And in fact, Pope Francis wishes to travel to this very place, to the beating (and hellish) heart of this vast African country. Wounded and at war with itself. Where, as if the fighting were not enough, even the volcano is periodically re-awakening, razing houses to the ground. "The young girls attending sewing classes in our dressmaking *atelier* - says Lo Schiavo - are still traumatised by the volcano's eruption last May. Nevertheless, the people always manage to start all over again; they have incredible strength!" **The visit to Congo.** Speaking to us from Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville, Father **Gaspare Trasparano**, says: "What would I like to say to the Holy Father? The same thing I would have told him in 2017 when it was impossible for him to visit us because of the upcoming elections. I want to ask him to remain steadfast in his denunciations and to be a prophetic voice, only he is capable of such perseverance. The state of siege has made everything worse, not only in Beni but also in Ituri Province." The Comboni missionary is the acting director of the country's Pontifical Missionary Works. "We have been waiting for this visit for the past six years and we hope that the Pope's presence in Goma will bring about an upturn and cast a spotlight on eastern Congo. We hope it will eventually culminate in a court case against the perpetrators of the carnage, at the International Criminal Court", he said referring to the incessant attacks on civilians throughout the region and in Beni in particular. The missionary confirms, after having spoken with the apostolic nuncio in Congo, that the Pontiff will make at least two stopovers in Congo and will meet with a delegation of the victims' families. "The UN Blue Helmets say they have evidence, that they have filmed the perpetrators of the massacres with drones and that there will be trials, but this never happens," adds Father Gaspare. **"Need for saintly political leaders."** Father **Francesco Zampese**, Xaverian missionary from Congo who served in Goma for 17 years and is currently in Italy, says that "the Pope's visit is a miracle" "It is vital that faith and politics be closely intertwined, we need saintly politicians - he adds - This necessity was reaffirmed many years ago at

---

the African Synod, and I hope that the Pope's visit to Congo will bring about a Copernican revolution in the way people look at Africa. Francis looks at the continent with equal openness and care." **In South Sudan for a promise...** The Pope will also travel to South Sudan, whose population shows tremendous strength and courage, but which remains among the world's most fragile States. Here too, the problematic peace process between the many armed militias ( part of which are aligned with the president, and the rest with his rival), has recently suffered a setback. And here, too, Bergoglio will follow up on the promise he made in 2019. "This apostolic visit was eagerly awaited. The Pope had promised he would visit us," says another long-serving missionary, the Comboni Sister **Elena Balatti**, speaking to us on the phone. "The Holy Father washing the feet of the South Sudanese leaders in the Vatican is an image that will go down in history. In Juba, "government officials immediately welcomed with great favour the news that Francis' dreamt journey was coming true", she adds. "It is a dream indeed, as South Sudan's image is negative: it is viewed as the country of war and of problems. The Pope's visit is expected to change this perception." Easier said than done, and harder to put into practice. The irreconcilable enmity between Vice-President Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir (the same parties who promised negotiations in 2019, standing before the Pope who knelt at their feet replicating the Gospel's Pedelavium) has recently flared up again, as reported by Africa News. To the extent that Macahr reportedly asked for the assistance of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who led the Sudan coup. Moreover, Khartoum is a guarantor of the peace agreement in South Sudan, marred by the latest events that see the rebel and Government factions (supporting either side) resume the path of war. The crux of the matter is rejoining the national army (which is not operating as it should) and the challenge of a joint government. Sharing power and the partition of wealth constitute the vulnerable face of a nation in turmoil. **A dramatic moment.** "South Sudan is facing a very critical moment, the crucial provisions of the peace agreement have still not been implemented and in this context the elections planned for 2023 could reopen new violent conflicts", **Yasmin Sooka**, Chair of the Human Rights Commission in South Sudan, told *Africa Express*. She added: "We are deeply aware that international attention is focussed on the horrific war in Ukraine, but we must not forget what is happening in South Sudan." International attention - with the spotlight on their actions - is what the leaders need. The Pope's visit is expected to restore to the country the central role it deserves. There are over two million displaced persons today, with over 2.3 million refugees in neighbouring countries; 8.9 million South Sudanese are in urgent need of humanitarian aid. In addition, according to the Commission's report of March 18, members of the Juba government are allegedly guilty of human rights violations amounting to 'war crimes' in the south-west of the country. These wounds run too deep and only a miracle can heal them. That is, provided it is given scope and opportunity to operate. (\*) Popoli e Missione

Ilaria De Bonis (\*)