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## **South Sudan. Carlassare (Bishop of Rumbek): "We will walk all the way to Juba to meet the Pope"**

"Today I can walk, but after four bullets in my legs it's will never be as it was before." Despite suffering a serious attack on the night of 25-26 April 2021, Monsignor Christian Carlassare, Comboni bishop of Rumbek in South Sudan, will travel on foot all the way to Juba with approximately one hundred young people from his diocese to see the Pope. He will walk with them 40 kilometres a day for eight days, offering catechesis and moments of reflection on reconciliation and unity, amidst the rainy season's muddy roads and unsafe inland tracks, frequently the target of attacks by militia. "My only doubt is whether my legs will resist, but I think I will manage. In any case, we will be escorted by some vehicles - he told SIR -. I think it's important for the youth to perceive the journey as a walk of peace leading to a meeting with the Pope. We will ask the government for special protection and we will make an appeal to the militias to ensure that there are no clashes." This is the prevailing mood a few weeks ahead of Pope Francis' visit to South Sudan - from July 5 to 7 - following his stopover in the Democratic Republic of Congo from July 2 to 5. The Pope will be travelling to conflict zones in a wheelchair due to a knee pain that limits his mobility. This virtually symbolic situation somewhat mirrors the weariness of the population, tried by long years of violence and having almost lost all hopes of finally reaching full unity and peace.

**The Pope's visit and the people's expectations.** Hopes were at their highest in 2019 when Pope Francis made the historic gesture of kissing the feet of South Sudan's previously warring political leaders, including Vice President Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir. The incumbent national unity government proclaims peace in words, yet in deeds violence is still rife. The latest grave attacks occurred in Unity State, with villages set on fire, violence and rape.

"It is important that also the people choose peace and demilitarise their territories to give this journey real meaning,

points out the bishop of Rumbek: "We hope that the Pope's visit will help revive the peace process, bringing about long-needed unity and reconciliation."

**The conflict is set against a backdrop of extreme poverty**, whereby "those with weapons try to seize the resources." "Along with disarmament, economic recovery - yet to be seen - is urgently needed," the bishop explains. "Half of the population is less than 24 years-old, young people are discouraged because there are no jobs or opportunities. Sixty per cent of the overall population are illiterate, a third are school-age children. Therefore, education is our biggest priority. We have 20,000 students in our schools, both diocesan and religious institutes. But after so many years people have lost their energy towards peacebuilding and it is necessary to overcome disillusionment."

**The impact of the war in Ukraine.** Although the people of South Sudan are poorly informed about the situation in Ukraine and the rest of the world due to poor media coverage of international issues - there is only one TV that reports on domestic politics and many local radio stations - Monsignor Carlassare spares no opportunity to highlight the similarities and contradictions. "I found myself reflecting on the fact that here people are killing each other for access to water or land while in Europe we risk a nuclear war.

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The local population views the conflict in Ukraine with shock and disappointment as they find it hard to believe that even democratic Europe has succumbed to these tragic dynamics. They don't understand why we are asking them to make peace while the Europeans are setting a bad example."

The impact of the war in Ukraine is reflected in overall price increases, although the wheat comes from Uganda (like fuel) and Kenya. "Yet it could impact on the 4 million displaced persons who depend entirely on humanitarian aid from the UN."



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[What I experienced connected me to the history and suffering of these people.](#)

[For them it was almost a redeeming sign, although the feelings about what happened to me differ depending on the interpretations given to the facts."](#)

**[Alleged motives for the ambush.](#)** Four people have been arrested over the past few months - an alleged instigator that keeps pleading innocent, two killers and an accomplice - with a first instance judgement to be reviewed by the court of appeal. According to the bishop-missionary, the motivation for the ambush is presumably linked to the period when the diocese of Rumbek remained vacant for many years, after the death of Bishop Cesare Mazzolari. "Criminal groups with an interest in the activities of the diocese might have emerged, and that attack was meant to keep me at a distance", he replies. "But such power games are nowhere near my intentions and those of the Church in South Sudan." Monsignor Carlassare has not met his assailants so far, but he plans to do so "when the

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circumstances of the case become clear and a definitive judgement is issued." And while his pastoral mission began amidst serious turbulence, after more than a year there is a glimmer of hope, symbolised by the first name given to him by his people:

"They call me War, which in the local language means 'change'".

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