

In Africa, Catholics steering delicate course

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) - Winding its way across Africa is an invisible faultline between a mainly Muslim north and a majority Christian south. Across this front, somewhere in the scrubland south of the Sahara desert, tensions flare between increasingly strident Christian movements aggressively working to convert people of other faiths and an Islamic world wary of encroaching Western influences.

When the two worlds collide — a Muslim takes offense at a woman showing too much skin or a shop selling alcohol, a Christian takes umbrage when a thief's hand is chopped off — entire villages can riot.

Africa's nearly 900 million people offer the largest field of potential converts anywhere in the world, and the competition for souls is fiercest between the continent's two biggest reli-

gions — Catholicism and Islam.

Catholicism, with an estimated 136 million African followers, is the most important brand of Christianity on the continent. As such, the next pope's challenge will be to calm Africa's religious tensions, trying to bridge a gulf of distrust fostered by extremists on both sides.

"The Vatican recognizes that in sub-Saharan Africa you have the area where Muslims and Christians are most likely to be confronting each other," says John Voll, director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington D.C.

"It is a high priority to make sure that those Catholic interactions with Muslims don't necessarily lead to open conflict."

But the ancient battle has exploded across an invisible frontier that separates not just

religions but also cultures and major ethnic groups and ancient divisions between herders and settled farmers.

The 21-year civil war that recently ended in Sudan erupted when the Arab government imposed strict Islamic law opposed by Whites in the south, where more than 4 million Catholics make up 13 percent of the population. That war is blamed for more than 2 million deaths.

Tens of thousand of others have been killed across religious faultline in conflicts in Liberia, Ivory Coast and Nigeria, whose estimated 20 million Catholics are outnumbered on the continent only by Congo's 28 million-plus adherents.

British colonizers' decision to rule northern Nigeria through Muslim emirs while Irish Catholic missionaries proselytized in the south has produced a nation where tribal divisions are tran-

scended only by religion. The nation of 126 million people is roughly evenly split between Christians and Muslims.

Across Africa, Islam and Christianity are both estimated to have about 400 million followers, with animists making up most of the remainder.

In Nigeria, riots erupted in 2000 when mainly Muslim northern states instituted Islamic law, including punishments of amputation and death by stoning.

In 2002, more than 200 people died in Christian-Muslim riots triggered by opposition to holding the Miss World competition in Nigeria. This month, Nigerian newspapers have been full of reports that Islamic leaders are preparing a violent jihad, which they deny. Islamic leaders, meanwhile, complain Muslims are being marginalized under a south-

ern Christian president who ended 20 years of northern rule.

Pope John Paul II chose Nigeria's most powerful cleric, Cardinal Francis Arinze, to lead the church's rapprochement with other religions at a time when fundamentalist Islamic and Protestant sects replaced communism as the biggest challenge to Catholic proselytizing.

Arinze, whom some consider a top contender for pope, took the route of stressing Islam and Catholicism's common fight against sexual permissiveness and contraception.

"Authentic dialogue demands that Muslims and Christians accept one another with all their similarities and differences," he told students at Roman Catholic Georgetown University in Washington D.C. in 1993.

He added: "Muslim-Christian relations are chal-

lenged and obstructed by religious fanaticism or extremism."

More extreme forms of Christianity and Islam are gaining strength in Africa, raising the risk of more confrontation, especially as the two sides compete for converts from each other's camps as the ranks of followers of traditional animist religions shrink.

The Rev. Matthew Hassan Kukah, an influential Nigerian Catholic priest, reserves his most trenchant criticism for evangelical Christians rather than Muslims, saying they are promoting a materialist view of Christianity and stoking tensions by behaving "as if they were out to convert everyone."

Muslims have rioted when evangelical churches hold football-stadium gatherings.

"There is too much aggression," (See Catholics, Page 15)

Brazil develops closer trade, cultural ties to Africa

By Mario Osava
Special to Sentinel-Voice
RIO DE JANEIRO (NNPA) - Forging closer ties with Africa is clearly a top priority for Brazilian President Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva, who is on his fourth official African tour since taking office.

After arriving in Cameroon, Lula headed to Nigeria. He will also visit Ghana, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal on his five-day tour of five West African nations. During his brief stay in each, his main goal will be to strengthen cooperation, particularly in the social sphere, according to the director of

the Africa desk at the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, Pedro Motta.

But Lula's visit will also contribute to the pursuit of two other objectives: garnering support for Brazil's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and seeking out a wider range of markets for the South American giant's exports.

Trade between Brazil and Africa has grown significantly over recent years, more than doubling since 2000, when it totaled \$4.25 billion.

Last year, trade in both directions reached nearly

\$10.42 billion — reflecting a 69.7 percent increase over the previous year—with a \$1.9 billion trade deficit on Brazil's side, resulting from oil imports.

The Lula government is making good progress towards an "effective African policy" that responds to the real interests of both sides, although there is still too much of an emphasis on immediate goals, said Edson Borges, a researcher with the Centre for Afro-Asian Studies at Cândido Mendes University in Rio de Janeiro.

The forging of closer ties with Africa is one of the few areas in which Lula is re-

maining faithful to his leftist Workers Party's platform of steering foreign policy towards strengthening South-South relations and diversifying the centres of power while maintaining traditional ties with the industrialized countries, Borges told IPS.

The African nations represent "new markets for exporting everything from needles to automobiles," while some are even potential buyers of more sophisticated products, thanks to their oil export revenues, he noted.

Yet the pursuit of this objective and of support for the government's Security Council aspirations constitutes a narrow approach to a policy that should ideally be aimed at identifying Africa's most essential needs and a set of common interests, including Brazil's shared racial, cultural and linguistic heritage with the Portuguese-speaking African nations, as fellow former colonies of Portugal.

Borges, who is also a professor of African history at Cândido Mendes University, said there are high expectations in Africa, especially among intellectual circles, for a Brazilian policy that would more fully and deeply address the interests of both sides.

Africa needs investment, he noted, but since the Brazilian state lacks the necessary capital, any investment

would have to come from the private sector, which for now has little interest in pursuing operations in Africa.

For example, the oil deposits in Sao Tome and Principe — a former Portuguese colony — have had to depend on U.S. companies for development.

The oil produced by African countries like Nigeria and Gabon will become especially important in the future, since Brazil has limited reserves and lacks competitiveness in terms of productivity, he noted.

A more ambitious strategy could include aspects like education, the fight against AIDS, and the implementation in Africa of social programs developed in Brazil, like the "school grant" initiative, through which families who keep their children in school receive a government subsidy.

Brazil "has a great deal to gain," because its large population of African descendants, its culture, and the high regard it enjoys throughout Africa could allow it to achieve a degree of influence similar to that of past colonial powers like France and Britain, Borges concluded.

A country of 182 million, Brazil has the ninth largest economy in the world.

Lula's current tour encompasses a range of different interests. Nigeria, the largest African country in terms of population — with 140 million inhabitants — is emerging as a major trading partner, according to the Brazilian foreign ministry. Bilateral trade—totaled about \$4 billion in 2004, which was nearly twice the amount for the previous year.

Brazil's imports of Nigeria (See Brazil, Page 15)

SINGING SPOKESWOMAN

The UN children's agency (UNICEF) named popular South African singer Yvonne Chaka Chaka, seen here performing in 2003, as its spokeswoman for malaria in eastern and southern Africa in a bid to raise awareness of the killer disease.



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