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## Religious leaders unite to disarm hearts and minds

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and Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame Gbangou

**In the Central African Republic, where religion has been used as a tool to divide and manipulate the population, religious leaders have come together to promote tolerance and forgiveness as a basis for rebuilding peaceful cohabitation.**

The recent crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR), with its roots in political power struggles, has threatened to destroy the underlying social fabric that was for so long a source of religious tolerance. In the process, nearly a million people – about a fifth of the population of the country – have been forced to flee their homes. At present, there are roughly 485,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 180,000 CAR refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries since December 2013.

In the wake of the conflict is an environment of suspicion and fear, as well as a deep-seated desire for truth and justice, which the national government, in its current strained state, is unable to provide. This environment has provided the perfect opportunity for rebel, militia and political leaders with an interest in perpetuating instability to use religion as a tool for further dividing and manipulating the Central African people. However, as religious leaders, we know very well that the recent crisis, at its heart, has never been about religion.

Although religion is not the root cause of the conflict, religion can serve as a powerful tool for transforming hearts and minds and uniting people in the common cause of peaceful reconciliation. In 2012, before the recent crisis, we founded the Central African Inter-Religious Platform, made up of the Evangelical Alliance, the Islamic Community and the Episcopal Conference of CAR. In

partnership with Catholic Relief Services and USAID, we have launched a national campaign for social cohesion, bringing together thousands of Muslims and Christians in demonstrations of solidarity. We have trained hundreds of religious leaders, civil society, government officials and armed group representatives to become ambassadors of peaceful co-existence. Many of these leaders have subsequently led their constituents and communities through the same process.

In a country where churches and mosques have more legitimacy than the national government and reach deep into the heart of the country, where government resources are limited, religious institutions are uniquely positioned for responding to humanitarian needs. Throughout the country, displaced populations of Muslims and Christians alike have taken shelter in church and mosque grounds. We have witnessed moving examples of religious leaders risking their lives to serve the needs of displaced persons of another faith. These powerful examples of forgiveness and reconciliation are not the exception but the norm. As we so often say here in CAR: “On est ensemble” – We are together.

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*“Our main challenge is to live together when we’ve been shattered by violence; it makes us suspicious of each other, that our neighbour is an informer or a collaborator. Reconstructing the social fabric will take time. Disarming people is one thing; disarming hearts is a much harder task at hand.”*  
Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga.