

In a statement on May 17, President Museveni announced the postponement following consultations with religious leaders and national epidemic response authorities.

BY SYLVIA NAMAGEMBE

The Catholic Church and the Church of Uganda have both supported the government's decision to postpone the June 3 Uganda Martyrs Day celebrations at Namugongo.

The celebrations were postponed following an outbreak of Ebola in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo. Many pilgrims travel from the Democratic Republic of Congo to attend the annual event.

In a statement on May 17, President Museveni announced the postponement following consultations with religious leaders and national epidemic response authorities.

He said the move was necessary to protect the lives and health of pilgrims and the general public.

Martyrs Day remains one of the most significant events on Uganda's Christian calendar, so the decision has disrupted preparations for what annually attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to Namugongo Martyrs Shrine and the Munyonyo Basilica.

In a May 18 statement signed by the Chairperson of the Uganda Episcopal Conference, Rt Rev Joseph Anthony Zziwa, the Catholic Church urged the faithful to remain calm, prayerful, and united.

"The commemoration of the Uganda Martyrs remains a profound witness

Church guides on Martyrs Day amid Ebola concerns



President Museveni and First Lady Janet Museveni interact with clergy and government officials after the Martyrs' Day prayers at the Uganda Catholic Martyrs Shrine in Namugongo, in Wakiso District, on June 3, 2024. PHOTO/ ABU-BAKER LUBOWA

of faith, courage, fidelity to Christ, and steadfast commitment to Christian values.

Although the national gathering has been postponed, dioceses and parishes should proceed with local celebrations under the guidance of their bishops and in line with government directives," the statement reads in part.

Rt Rev Zziwa, who is also the Bishop of Kiyinda-Mityana Diocese, also called on the faithful to pray for the nation, health workers, and communities affected by the circumstances that led to the postponement.

He urged the faithful to strictly adhere

WHY THE CANCELLATION

The decision comes amid heightened regional concern over Ebola, with authorities monitoring outbreaks in parts of eastern DRC. According to the World Health Organisation, countries sharing borders with the DR Congo are at high risk for further spread due to mobility of people, trade and travel linkages.

to the Ministry of Health guidelines.

"The witness of the Uganda Martyrs continues to inspire the Church and the nation, reminding us that true faith is lived daily through love, sacrifice, truth, and fidelity to God," the Uganda Episcopal Conference said in the statement.

The Provincial Secretary of the Church of Uganda, Rev Canon William Ongeng, said, "Following consultations with the Government of Uganda, the national epidemic response authorities, and religious leaders, the decision to postpone this year's celebrations has been made in the interest of protecting the lives and health of pilgrims."

The Church of Uganda said it would await further government guidance on alternative arrangements for commemorations to proceed in a safe manner.

Pilgrims and preparations affected
Martyrs Day typically attracts pilgrims from across Uganda and beyond, many of whom travel long distances and begin preparations weeks in advance.

Therefore, despite the coordinated backing from the two main Christian institutions, the postponement has left many pilgrims uncertain.

That is especially those who had already began travel arrangements or invested in accommodation and logistics for the annual pilgrimage.

The postponement is also expected to affect vendors, transport operators, and small businesses that depend on the annual influx of visitors to the martyrs shrines.

President Museveni urged those already trekking toward Namugongo to halt their journeys.

Church leaders, however, urged believers not to panic, saying dioceses and parishes would guide on alternative observances at the local level.

Health officials have previously warned that large gatherings can increase risks of transmission of diseases, prompting calls for preventive measures. The government has announced that the Martyrs' Day, observed on June 3, annually, remains a public holiday.

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