

Strict health screening, reduced foreign participation and repeated calls for vigilance define this year's commemoration.

BY MONITOR TEAM

The spectre of Ebola loomed large over this year's Uganda Martyrs Day celebrations as thousands of pilgrims stayed away from Namugongo and worshippers who attended were subjected to strict health screening in a rare convergence of faith and disease prevention.

For the first time in recent memory, the sprawling grounds of the Uganda Martyrs Catholic Shrine and the Anglican Martyrs Site bore little resemblance to the sea of humanity that normally converges on Namugongo every June 3.

Instead, worshippers arrived in small numbers, passing through screening and sanitisation points under the watchful eye of health workers and security personnel deployed to prevent the spread of the deadly Ebola virus.

The subdued celebrations followed the suspension of the annual pilgrimage and cancellation of large-scale commemorations amid fears that the outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) could spill across the border into Uganda.

The result was a markedly different Martyrs' Day, one where public health precautions took centre stage alongside prayers and religious reflection.

Throughout the day, health workers monitored worshippers, while volunteers enforced standard operating procedures aimed at reducing the risk of disease transmission.

At the Catholic Shrine, worshippers were screened before entering designated prayer areas. Organisers staggered prayer sessions to minimise congestion, while chairs and worship spaces were sanitised after every Mass.

The atmosphere reminded many of the restrictions witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic, when religious gatherings were heavily regulated in the interest of public safety.

Foreign participation was also significantly reduced.

Only a handful of pilgrims from outside Uganda attended the celebrations, including four participants each from Nigeria and Germany, alongside clergy representatives from Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso and South Africa. The Vatican was represented by a papal envoy.

During the main Mass at the Catholic Shrine, Archbishop Emeritus Augustine Kasujja, who presided over the celebrations, repeatedly urged Ugandans to re-



Christians attend Martyrs' Day prayers at Mamre International Prayer Centre Janda. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE

# Ebola casts shadow over Martyrs' Day celebrations

main vigilant and comply with government health guidelines.

"I greet and send special greetings to Bishop [Francis] Kibira and all the faithful of Kasese Diocese who had been selected this year and were already prepared to direct the national annual pilgrimage to Namugongo but were impeded by the menace of Ebola infections," Archbishop Kasujja said.

He called for solidarity with communities affected by disease and other hardships across the continent.

"We cannot close our eyes to the suffering of our neighbours. We should stand in solidarity with those affected by disease, displacement and poverty across Africa through all forms of support we can offer, especially prayer," he said.

## Values of martyrs

The archbishop used the occasion to challenge Ugandans, particularly young people, to emulate the values demonstrated by the Uganda Martyrs.

He warned against corruption, abuse of office, greed, immorality, environ-



## What they say.

"Our martyrs invite us today to follow in their footsteps and resist the temptations of corruption, immorality, laziness, abuse of authority, ecological destruction, land grabbing and unjust enrichment," Archbishop Emeritus Augustine Kasujja

mental destruction and land grabbing, saying these vices continue to undermine the country's moral fabric.

"Our martyrs invite us today to follow in their footsteps and resist the temptations of corruption, immorality, laziness, abuse of authority, ecological destruction, land grabbing and unjust enrichment," he said. Archbishop Kasujja said Uganda could reclaim its reputation as the Pearl of Africa if citizens embraced justice, honesty and mutual respect.

"With sincere prayer and total confidence in God, and through the intercession of the Uganda Martyrs, Uganda can recover its historical image where jus-

tice, peace, mutual love and trust reign," he said.

The representative of the papal nuncio to Uganda, Rev Fr George Kwame, offered prayers for victims of the Ebola outbreak and for frontline health workers battling the disease.

At the Anglican Martyrs Site, Church of Uganda Archbishop Stephen Kaziimba Mugalu, used the celebrations to renew calls for the establishment of a National Health Insurance Scheme.

Drawing lessons from the Ebola threat and the growing burden of chronic illnesses, Archbishop Kaziimba said access to affordable healthcare remains beyond the reach of many Ugandans.

"We are struggling now with Ebola and I appreciate the Ministry of Health for the work it is doing. But we need to continue pursuing a national health insurance scheme in Uganda," he said.

The archbishop urged the 12th Parliament to prioritise legislation that would guarantee access to affordable healthcare.

"We have issues of cancer and many

diseases that people cannot afford to treat. We need to find a way of ensuring that every Ugandan can access healthcare," he added.

## 'Reject tribalism'

Elsewhere at Mamre International Prayer Centre in Namugongo, Bishop Jacinto Kibuuka of the Antiochian Orthodox Catholic Church urged Ugandans to reject tribalism, discrimination and hatred.

He said the Uganda Martyrs demonstrated unity and courage despite persecution and should inspire citizens to embrace national cohesion.

"Judging fellow Ugandans based on tribe, race, colour, language or culture is dangerous. The martyrs showed us that faith transcends these divisions," Bishop Kibuuka said.

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