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Six weeks ago, Muslim shepherd Oumarou Mandi was saved by the kindness of a Catholic priest who led him into a church to escape the savage attacks of a thuggish militia.

On Thursday, he dared to step outside the church compound for the first time. Nervous and fearful, he mustered his courage and joined a peace march. A few minutes later, the march disintegrated, the militia fighters were shouting insults, and he fled back at the church. “Now we can’t do this again,” he said softly.

In the chaos of the Central African Republic, peace remains an illusion. But amidst the sectarian killings, the mob lynchings and mutilations, there are still some heroes. One of them is Catholic priest Xavier-Arnauld Fagba, who opened his church doors to protect nearly 700 Muslims from near-certain death.

“They didn’t have anyone to help them,” said Father Fagba, 31, who became a priest just four months ago.

“When the Muslims were attacked, the people didn’t help them. That’s when I decided to look for them and bring them here. I did it in the name of my faith. My faith asks me to transcend the most difficult obstacles.”

The Muslims at the church are members of the Peul minority, a community of traditional herders. Accused of supporting atrocities by Muslim-led rebels who seized power in Central African Republic last year, they are often targeted for revenge attacks by the largely Christian anti-balaka militia.

But the people at the church say they never supported the rebels. “They even stole our cattle,” Mr. Mandi said.

On Jan. 16, after the rebels were pushed from power, anti-balaka fighters attacked the mosques in the town of Boali, about 100 kilometres north of the capital, Bangui. The shepherd, Mr. Mandi, was outside one mosque, preparing to pray, when the militia attacked with guns and knives, killing seven people in front of his eyes. He rushed home and hid his wife and children. Then the priest arrived, asking them to run to the church. Father Fagba rescued hundreds of Muslims that day, going house to house and even into the bush to find them.

A few days later, when Father Fagba was visiting a sick parishioner, his car was surrounded by angry militia fighters, armed with machetes and knives. They wanted to kill him for sheltering Muslims. The priest got out of his car to show that he was unafraid. “I wanted to show them that I didn’t regret what I did,” he said.

Luckily a militia commander saw the confrontation and shouted to his men to spare the priest. But on the night of Feb. 4, after some militia men were killed by Chadian peacekeepers who were escorting Muslims to safety outside the country, the militia attacked the church to take revenge.

The Muslims were crying, terrified, as machine-gun bullets hit the church from all sides. The priest recalled that he told them to lie on the floor. He hit the floor too. Nobody was injured, but dozens of bullet holes can still be seen in the church walls today.

Dozens of African Union peacekeeping troops are posted around the church to protect the Muslims. But the checkpoints leading to the town are controlled by the anti-balaka militia: menacing men armed with machine guns, hunting rifles, machetes and knives. A small van, packed with fleeing Muslims from another town, drove slowly up the road on Thursday, escorted by African peacekeepers in two armoured vehicles.

Nobody knows how much longer the Muslims will have to stay at the church. One man ventured outside to buy airtime for his cellphone, but he was stabbed and his cellphone was stolen. “We consider everyone a threat because we don’t know who is anti-balaka,” Mr. Mandi said.

Sometimes the Muslim women go to the market to buy food, which is increasingly expensive because the Muslim traders have fled, but they face threats and insults. “We’re going to finish you off,” they are told.

On Sunday mornings, the Muslims get up early to clean the church and sweep the floors, so that it will be tidy when the Catholics arrive for their service. Father Fagba preaches peace in his sermons, and he leads his parishioners outside the church to exchange handshakes with the Muslims.

He thought the peace march on Thursday was an encouraging sign of reconciliation – a goal that is often promised by the new interim president, Catherine Samba-Panza. But the march fell apart when the anti-balaka militia members saw the Muslims coming to join the march. “We can’t mix with them,” the militia shouted as they pulled down a flag and the marchers scattered.

“I’m very sad about it,” Father Fagba said. “I thought it was the beginning of peace. But it was too early.”

Geoffrey York - The Globe and Mail