

Pope Francis in Kenya at start of African tour

The BBC's reports from the papal plane



Pope Francis has arrived in Kenya for a three-nation African tour - his first to the continent as pontiff. President Uhuru Kenyatta and ululating crowds welcomed him at the airport in the capital, Nairobi. The pope called for peace, saying conflict and terrorism "feed on fear, mistrust, and the despair born of poverty and frustration".

A leading Muslim cleric in Kenya welcomed the visit, saying it gave hope to the "downtrodden in the slums".

An atheist group said it would challenge in court a government decision to declare Thursday a holiday in honour of the pontiff.

Pope Francis is also due to visit Uganda and Central African Republic, which has been hit by Christian-Muslim conflict.

Kenya's government has said that up to 10,000 police officers may be deployed during the visit.

Militant Islamists have carried out a spate of attacks in Kenya - including the 2013 siege at Nairobi's Westgate shopping centre, which left at least 67 dead, and the killing of about 150 people during an assault on the Garissa National University College in April this year.

Welcomed in Latin

"All men and women of goodwill are called to work for reconciliation and peace, forgiveness and healing," Pope Francis said at a function hosted by President Kenyatta in State House.

"Ultimately, the struggle against these enemies of peace and prosperity must be carried on by men and women who fearlessly believe in, and bear honest witness to, the great spiritual and political values

which inspired the birth of the nation," he added.

Religion in Sub-Saharan Africa:

People from all over Kenya came to see the pope

In South Sahara Region:

Christian population is 517 million (63% of total)

Protestants make up more than half the number

Catholics make up about a third

Muslim population is 248 million (about 30% of total)

1.1 billion Christians expected by 2050

670 million Muslims expected by 2050

Source: US-based Pew Research Center 2011 survey

The BBC's Joseph Odhiambo in Nairobi says about 30% of Kenyans - including President Kenyatta - are baptised Catholics, and there is huge excitement around the visit.

Crowds lined the streets of Nairobi to catch a glimpse of the pope as he was driven in a grey Honda saloon to Mr Kenyatta's office for his official engagement.

One of Kenya's main newspapers, The Standard, welcomed him with headlines in Latin, Grata Franciscus Pontifex, and the regional Swahili language, Karibu Papa Francis.

Headline in The Standard newspaper  Image copyright The Standard

The Pope is expected to tackle corruption, poverty and religious conflict during his five-day visit.

'Consoling poor'

Abdalla Kwamana, the vice-chairman of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, said he would attend an inter-faith meeting the pontiff is hosting on Thursday.

He described the visit as highly significant, and welcomed the Pope's decision to include a shantytown in his itinerary.

"It is often said that Kenya is owned by the rich and powerful. The people in the slums are never recognised," Mr Kwamana told the BBC's Newsday programme.

Soldiers patrol as people wait for the arrival of Pope Francis, in Nairobi's State House, Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2015Image copyrightAP

Image caption

Security has been tightened to ensure there are no attacks by militant Islamists

"When he goes to see them and console them, they'll feel they are people of substance," he added.

Pope Francis is due to hold a mass on Thursday at the University of Nairobi sports ground, where a crowd of more than one million is expected, Kenya's private Daily Nation newspaper reports.

The tiny Atheists in Kenya group said the decision to declare Thursday a public holiday and a day of prayer was unconstitutional.

"The constitution clearly states that there shall be no state religion. We cannot have the government acting religiously," its leader Harrison Mumia said, Nation FM radio station reports.

One in six of the world's Catholics are in Africa.

Caroline Wyatt - BBC