News



Sr. Regina Roba, in blue, with Catholic Health Training Institute students (Courtesy of Friends in Solidarity)

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Editor's note: *This story was updated Aug. 18 with new material throughout and Aug. 20 with new photos.*

The killing of two Catholic nuns along a South Sudan highway Aug. 16 has shocked sisters and supporters throughout several African nations, Rome and the United States.

Srs. Mary Daniel Abut and Regina Roba were South Sudanese members of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in the Juba Archdiocese. They were in a bus returning to Juba with seven sisters and five men Aug. 16 after attending centenary celebrations at Loa Catholic parish in the eastern Diocese of Torit, according to a statement by Sr. Alice Jurugo Drajea, superior general of the congregation.

According to the statement, the bus left at 7:30 a.m. and was barely an hour into the trip when armed men ambushed the bus and started shooting at it. The driver ordered the men on the bus to flee, thinking that the gunmen would spare the sisters. Four of the sisters left the bus with the men. The gunmen followed and shot Abut and Roba, the statement said.



Sr. Mary Daniel Abut (Courtesy of Friends in Solidarity)

"Three elderly sisters remained in the bus, and the gunmen intended to burn them in the bus as they did with a small car in front of the bus," Drajea said in the statement. "Thank God, they did have neither a lighter nor petrol to start off the fire."

Fr. Samuel Abe of the Juba Archdiocese announced a four-day mourning period Aug. 17. The sisters will be buried Aug. 20 at the St. Theresa Cathedral in Juba.

At the Vatican, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, sent a telegram to the chargés d'affaires at the Vatican Embassy to South Sudan, saying Pope Francis was "deeply saddened to learn of the brutal attack." The pope offered condolences to the victims' families and religious community and offered his prayers and blessing.

Abut had served as the superior general of the order from 2006 to 2018. She was head of the order's Usratuna Primary School, which has more than 1,000 students in Juba.



Sr. Regina Roba Luate (Courtesy of Friends in Solidarity)

Roba was from the Yei Diocese in Central Equatoria and was a nurse who served for many years in Loa Parish in the Torit Diocese, Juba Sacred Heart Health Centre and Alshaba Children's hospital in Juba. She was at tutor at the Catholic Health Training Institute in Wau.

"In the two sisters the Congregation has lost great resource persons with excelling leadership qualities," Drajea said in the statement. "May their innocent blood unite us in our Congregation more and bring peace to this country of South Sudan which has never known true peace. May their souls rest in God's eternal Peace!"

Sr. Joan Mumaw, president and chief administrative officer for the Maryland-based Friends in Solidarity, the U.S. partner to Solidarity with South Sudan, a collaborative ministry of religious congregations of men and women, recalled meeting Abut once when Abut was cleaning the local chapel.

"A humble soul," Mumaw, who is a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan, wrote in an email to Global Sisters Report. "Certainly she was well known to Solidarity as we work closely with the sisters and have helped to build the capacity of several sisters. I am very disheartened by this event."


"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I Will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesess, so that Christ`s power may rest on me" (2 Cor.12:9)
Sr. Mary Daniel Abut
Sr. Regina Roba

A prayer card for Srs. Mary Daniel Abut and Regina Roba (Courtesy of Friends in Solidarity)

"Sister Regina will be greatly missed by the staff and students at the Catholic Health Training Institute in Wau where she was part of the staff training nurses and midwives," Mumaw added. The killings, she said, are "a tragedy for the whole church."

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Juba is an indigenous diocesan congregation founded the late Bishop Sixtus Mazzoldi, a Comboni missionary to the Sudan, in 1954. The congregation works in Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda and Kenya and has a community in Phoenix.

The congregation's original mission was to educate children and run schools. Their service has since expanded to care for orphans and to minister to those who are vulnerable and abandoned, including those in refugee settlements and prisons, according to a history of the congregation. The congregation's charism is: "To serve the vulnerable and most abandoned with love and compassion drawn from the virtues of the Sacred Heart of Jesus."

South Sudan marked its 10th anniversary in July as the world's youngest country after a decades-long war for independence. But the commemoration has been overshadowed by uncertainty, violence and ongoing humanitarian challenges.

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The deaths of the sisters threaten to scuttle ongoing peace talks led by the Sant'Egidio Community in Rome. South Sudanese President Salva Kiir Mayardit said his government could reconsider its position on the initiative; he blamed the ambush on armed factions that have not signed the 2018 revitalized peace agreement.

"The responsibility for death lies squarely on the hold-out groups," and the government "condemns this act of terror in the strongest terms possible," Kiir said in

a statement conveying his condolences to Archbishop Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla of Juba. He warned the government's pursuit of inclusive peace should never be taken for weakness and exploited to kill innocent citizens.

[Catholic News Service reporter Frederick Nzwili; Sr. Joyce Meyer, international sister liaison for Global Sisters Report; and Gail DeGeorge, GSR editor, contributed to this story.]



A sister boards the bus that was carrying seven sisters and five men from the Torit Diocese to the Juba Archdiocese in South Sudan after its ambush Aug. 16. (Courtesy of Christine John Amaa)

Related: South Sudan marks 10 years of independence overshadowed by violence