News



A man walks by a dead cow in Dong Boma, South Sudan, April 12. Up to 20 million people in South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia and northeast Nigeria face the prospect of famine this year. (CNS/Paul Jeffrey)

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Conflict and drought are threatening more than 20 million people in four countries with the prospect of famine, and the U.N. has called this food crisis the largest humanitarian crisis since the world body was formed more than 70 years ago.

Additional resources and funding are needed "to pull people back from the brink of famine" in Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and northeast Nigeria, the U.N. Security Council said in an Aug. 9 statement that commended efforts by international donors to provide humanitarian assistance for the crises in these countries.

Catholic church officials and representatives of Catholic aid agencies spoke with Catholic News Service about the enormous efforts being channeled into meeting the needs of those most vulnerable.

Governments "are reducing aid, while needs are skyrocketing," said Elizabeth Carosella, who works for the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services in Abuja, Nigeria.

Humans cannot control the weather patterns, such as drought. But increasingly, aid officials find access to areas of need blocked by ongoing conflicts or inaccessible because of poor infrastructure.

Jerry Farrell, country representative in South Sudan for CRS, was Save the Children's country director in Yemen until mid-2014. He called the situation in Yemen "horrific," a famine that is entirely man-made. Seventy percent of the country's 14 million people need some form of humanitarian aid.

Yemen has relied entirely on imported food since 1991 and "now it is sealed off from the rest of the world," Farrell said. Yemen has been embroiled in civil war since 2015, which includes a Saudi-led blockade of the country.

Yemen's food system has collapsed, Farrell said, noting that even hospitals have been bombed, and it is "as difficult to get medical supplies into the country as it is to get food in."

The World Health Organization reports 436,000 cases of cholera in Yemen.

Bishop Paul Hinder, who heads the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia from Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, told CNS that the blockade of Yemen hinders the reconstruction of the destroyed sanitary system.

"As long as the minimal infrastructure in many parts of the country is not functioning, we cannot expect that the cholera can be stopped" or that "the starving people" can be properly fed, Bishop Hinder said.

"Without bringing people again around the table" to agree on a cease-fire, "there will be only killing and destruction with disastrous consequences for the civilian population," he said.

"As the church is reduced to a tiny group without any structure, little can be done from our side at present," he said.

"As I believe in the power of the prayer, I can only ask the faithful around the world to keep in mind the suffering people in Yemen -- Muslims as well as the few remaining Christians, including the Missionaries of Charity," Bishop Hinder said.

In South Sudan, nearly 2 million people are on the cusp of famine, Farrell said, and it is hard to get food to the hungry because the country has "virtually no infrastructure." South Sudan, a country slightly smaller than Texas, has only 12,000 miles of road, which is "more like track than road," said Farrell, noting that "the lack of infrastructure can't be separated from the conflict."

In the fertile land of South Sudan's Western Equatoria state, which has avoided the drought afflicting other parts of the country, little grows because of the war, he said. And even if the residents were still able to grow mangoes and papayas in this "breathtakingly beautiful place," there are no roads to get any excess food to people outside, he said.

"Fresh food rots because it takes weeks to get it out of there with tracks to follow instead of roads, and one can expect frequent ambushes along the way," Farrell said.

In distributing food airdropped by the World Food Program, CRS finds "some places very difficult to get to because of active conflict," he said. Other places are unreachable for many months because of flooding. People often walk four or five miles to food distribution points in South Sudan, he added.

About 200,000 of the 2 million internally displaced people in South Sudan are in U.N.-run camps, Farrell said. The rest have fled into the bush or into neighboring communities, "and they all want to go home to their land."

Farrell said the tragedy of South Sudan "tires me out more and fills me with more sorrow" than even Yemen's situation did. In 2013, two years after gaining independence from Sudan, South Sudan was caught up in a civil war.

"South Sudan is a new country, rich in resources, and all this suffering is preventable," said Farrell, who is based in the capital, Juba.

"Education is what matters most for young people because they will be the new leaders," he said. Instead, because of the conflict and violence, all efforts need to be directed into emergency feeding programs, "while 75 percent of women in the country cannot read or write," he said.

Maryknoll Fr. John Barth, who is based in Eastern Equatoria state, told CNS South Sudanese "are giving up hope and moving to the camps in northern Uganda by the thousands; I see them along the road when I drive back and forth across the border."

Uganda is hosting about 1 million refugees from South Sudan. They move because "they have no food," Barth said.

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Teachers and others with government jobs have not been paid their monthly salaries in five months, and "even if they had been paid it would be the equivalent of about $6, because the 500 percent inflation has ruined the value of the South Sudanese pound," Barth said.

In northeastern Nigeria, the effects of violent conflict as well as changing weather patterns have exacerbated poverty and led to 5 million people in need of emergency food aid, Carosella told CNS, noting that deaths from famine-related causes have

already occurred in Borno state. Since 2009, more than 20,000 people have been killed and 2.7 million forced to flee their homes by the Boko Haram insurgency, aimed at creating an Islamic state in northeast Nigeria.

Carosella said while the severity of the region's hunger crisis is caused by conflict, the shorter rainy season of recent years has dramatically reduced harvests, and much of Lake Chad has dried up, partly because of shifting climate patterns.

Many of those forced to flee the violence have sought refuge among communities in remote rural areas, she said, noting that these communities are themselves among the most vulnerable in the region and depend on humanitarian aid to survive. Remote rural communities hosting people displaced by Boko Haram attacks have been "immensely generous despite their own poverty," she said.

Carosella said Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, "used to be a trade hub, but its markets have been destroyed" by the Boko Haram attacks.

"People have lost their livelihoods and now can't afford food and have no access to even basic services," she said.

Even where food can be found, it is unaffordable for most people, she said.

Sometimes a very malnourished woman will sell part of her food ration for cash that will enable her to transport a sick child to a clinic, Carosella said.

"Having to make that choice is something no one should have to face," she said.

She told of a 24-year-old woman she met at a hospital in Maiduguri.

"She fled her village with her four children, all under 5 years old, after seeing her husband and parents slaughtered" in an attack by Boko insurgents, Carosella said.

One of her children died in the 32 days it took her to walk to the hospital, where her "malnourished children were able to be rehabilitated," Carosella said. "She was looking for livelihood opportunities when I met her," she said, noting that "there are so many women in similar positions."



A 2-year-old girl eats a meal in an internally displaced camp in Riimenze, South Sudan, April 29. (CNS/Paul Jeffrey)

Somalia's "continuous conflict and instability," along with changing weather patterns, are responsible for its current crisis, Lane Bunkers, CRS country representative for Kenya and Somalia, told CNS.

The conflict started in 1991 when clan-based warlords overthrew dictator Siad Barre, then turned on each other. Today, the security threat posed by al-Shabab activity in south-central Somalia makes it difficult for CRS and others running emergency food programs to reach remote rural communities, Bunkers said.

Somalia is a "very undeveloped country that relies on rain, with rain-fed pasturelands," and there has been insufficient rain for two years in a row, Bunkers said.

Drought conditions in Somalia are expected to continue, and recovery will not be until at least 2018, CRS said in a statement. More than 766,000 people have been

displaced by the drought since November, it said.

In south-central Somalia, which includes the capital, Mogadishu, CRS has civil society partners to channel its resources for humanitarian relief.

"Somalia has very well-organized communities," Bunkers said, noting that local communities have "stepped in to fill the void in education and health services" in partnerships with international nongovernmental organizations.

Somalis are "entrepreneurial people in a desperately poor country," which has exceptionally active markets, Bunkers said. This is "born out of necessity" in a country that has had no functioning government for close to three decades, he said.

Somalis' "wealth is held in their herd of animals," Bunkers said, noting that in times of drought, men leave women and children behind and follow their goats, sheep or camels, seeking water and grazing land.

"It's very rare to resort to killing animals for food" in Somalia, Bunkers said.

To help families where animals are already in distress, some relief agencies "pay the farmer for his goat and have him slaughter it so that his family has something to eat," he said.

"The farmers are then able to use the cash at the markets to replenish their livelihoods," he said.

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