News



Mark Green, U.S. Agency for International Development administrator, and retired Army Maj. Gen. Thomas A. Wessels, president of Malteser International Americas, shake hands at USAID'S headquarters in Washington June 19 after signing an agreement that will help the Order of Malta's relief agency expand its humanitarian efforts. (CNS/courtesy Malteser International)

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Malteser International Americas, the 65-year-old humanitarian relief agency of the Order of Malta, and the U.S. Agency for International Development have signed an agreement that will help the Catholic organization expand its reach.

USAID Administrator Mark Green and retired Army Maj. Gen. Thomas A. Wessels, president of the Malteser International Americas, signed the memorandum at a ceremony at USAID headquarters in Washington June 19.

The agreement will let Malteser International Americas expand its reach of aid and refugee services in the 25 countries it serves, including Mexico, Haiti, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Colombia, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Syria, Ukraine and Philippines. The organization says 2 million benefited from its services last year.

The Malteser-USAID agreement, according to a general outline, agrees to focus on the fostering of peace, reducing poverty, preventing human trafficking and providing programs to help youths.

"Both organizations will consult on an ongoing basis," Wessels said in his statement.

He also praised the memorandum for putting Malteser International Americas "to the forefront of the humanitarian aid spectrum, while prioritizing the critical role of faith-based organizations in worldwide relief." In May, Malteser International gained "special consultative status" with the U.N. Economic and Social Council.

"We know that faith-based partners often have networks, historic relationships, and grass-roots expertise that extend beyond our own," Green said. "We also know that organizations like Malteser International are trusted voices in the communities where they work."

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On June 13, USAID announced $10 million in fast-tracked aid to an umbrella group headed by Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, and Heartland Alliance. Eventually, $25 million is expected to be disbursed to help minority communities in Iraq, particularly Christians and Yezidis, whose communities and those of other religious minorities were the targets of genocide during the rule of the Islamic State.

Vice President Mike Pence had been the leading advocate for the June 13 agreement, but Malteser International Americas took a different route.

"Actually, I think the fact that we asked," Wessels told Catholic News Service. "And the fact that we're already in 25 countries."

Connections also were made through New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl.

Wisconsin roots and shared Catholic upbringings also helped. Wessels is a former executive with Merrill Lynch in Milwaukee, and Green, a former U.S. ambassador to Tanzania, is a former four-term congressman representing Wisconsin's 8th Congressional District, which includes Green Bay.

"So we're basically a couple of cheeseheads," Wessels said, using a nickname for Wisconsinites.