News



A doctor checks the blood pressure of a displaced Iraqi woman in a medical center at a camp in Dahuk March 7, 2020. Catholic aid agencies helping the displaced in northern Iraq say they are reaching those in need as the COVID-19 situation there slowly improves. (CNS/Reuters/Ari Jalal)

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Catholic aid agencies helping the displaced in northern Iraq say they are reaching those in need as the COVID-19 situation slowly improves there.

"We are going back to normal life gradually," said Fr. Emanuel Youkhana, who runs the Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq (CAPNI), a Christian program for displaced Iraqis around the northern city of Dahuk.

The U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services also has resumed some of its activities in northern Iraq.

Youkhana, a priest, or archimandrite, of the Assyrian Church of the East, told CNS: "It all depends on the geography. We are permitted to do these activities in the geographical area we are able to operate in."

He said the Catholic charity Caritas in Germany is supporting a program for "1,000 food and hygiene baskets for 1,000 families in need, by door to door distribution. The authorities are facilitating this. We are relying on international donors. Because of Easter, it took a bit of time to approve and launch the project." Families typically include five or more children, so the outreach could involve more than 7,000 people.

The New York-based Catholic Near East Welfare Association is helping support CAPNI's counseling work in northern Iraq for more than 1,000 beneficiaries. The counseling targets Christian families and includes catechesis/spiritual direction and psycho-social assistance.

"We are reaching the needy, especially those who are internally displaced, mainly Christians and Yazidis, and who were relying on day-to-day work, and now they don't have this due to concerns over the coronavirus," Youkhana said.

He spoke of the aid recipients, who were victims of the terror and takeover of their villages and towns in the Ninevah Plain and Sinjar by Islamic State militants from 2014 to 2017.

Some Christians have returned to their towns and villages in the Ninevah Plain, but others, as well as large numbers of Yazidis, still shelter in areas in and around Dahuk due to fears of insecurity.

"Thank God in the early days (the Kurdish authorities) from the start took really strong restrictions, but now we feel it was good they did," Youkhana said.

The Kurdistan regional government closed the borders to neighboring countries as well as to other parts of Iraq. It even blocked transportation and movement between the other provinces in Kurdistan, such as Sulaimaniyah, Irbil and Dahuk.

Schools were closed as well as public sector offices. Private sector shops were limited to those providing basic services such as bakeries and food markets. Public gatherings such as weddings, funerals, youth gatherings were prohibited.

It has been impossible to travel between Dahuk and Ninevah, so CAPNI has not had physical access to its beneficiaries and facilities in the Ninevah Plain. Youkhana said he understood from authorities that there were no COVID-19 cases in the Ninevah Plain.

He said despite the restrictions in northern Iraq, some projects can be done via the internet.

"We are following some of our programs remotely by video sessions, Viber or WhatsApp. We have online advocacy training for human rights and minority rights," he said. "There are also activities for children, with teachers giving the lessons via Google class online, including health awareness of the virus, painting, English lessons, mathematics, etc."

The Kurdistan Regional Government said COVID-19 infections number "387, with no new ones confirmed." Youkhana said that, in Dahuk, there were just 15 cases of coronavirus officially reported and all have recovered.

Hani El-Mahdi, CRS Iraq country representative, said the agency has been allowed to resume some work, particularly "schools' rehabilitation, livelihoods and house repairs on shelters activities, mostly targeting returnees in the area."

El-Mahdi told CNS that shelter rehabilitation has been completed for Christians and Yazidis in several areas, and the agency will assess additional sites. CRS is also

helping Arabs and Shiite Shabaks.

CRS has been able to conduct livelihood training in several towns of the Ninevah Plain.

Youkhana expressed concern for Syrian refugees who fled northeast Syria when Turkish troops and militant fighters invaded late last year and those who came to northern Iraq even earlier due to the conflict. Most of the Syrians are living in refugee camps, he said.

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