News



Sean Callahan, president of Caritas North America and CEO of Catholic Relief Services, in a tan vest, is pictured at a camp for displaced people during his visit to southern Gaza Jan. 23, 2024. (OSV News/Courtesy Catholic Relief Services)

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As the Israel-Hamas war enters its fourth month, ending hostilities "all around" to deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip has become critical, the head of a U.S.-based Catholic aid agency told OSV News.

"We need a stopping of the violence," said Sean Callahan, president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services. "Stop the bombing and the violence and let's allow humanitarian actors to get in there and get the appropriate supplies (to people in Gaza)."

CRS, the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States, provides a range of assistance programs in more than 100 nations, and is now working to alleviate suffering caused by the Israel-Hamas war.

The war was sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7 surprise attack — coinciding with a Sabbath and Jewish holiday — on some 22 locations in Israel, leading to the worst loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust. Israel formally declared war on Hamas Oct. 8 and placed Gaza under siege, pounding the dense urban enclave with airstrikes and launching a ground invasion.

To date, more than 1,200 people in Israel, most of them civilians including 30 U.S. citizens, and at least 26,751 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, have been killed, according to Israeli and Palestinian officials, respectively. Hamas still has more than 100 hostages from its devastating assault, which a New York Times investigation confirmed involved the sexual assault, mutilation and murder of women and girls in at least seven locations.

The ensuing humanitarian crisis has left the Middle East "on the verge of the abyss," according to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres.

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Callahan, who traveled to Gaza, Jerusalem, the West Bank, Jordan and Egypt Jan. 16-26, spoke with OSV News to share his thoughts on addressing that humanitarian crisis.

He said the first step for CRS was "(visiting) with partners, people on the ground and our colleagues, just to make sure that we were understanding the situation on the ground adequately."

In addition, he sought to "make sure our partners and our team on the ground knew we were thinking of them ... and that we would use all the resources of the agency to support them."

Currently, CRS has 45 staff members in Gaza, down from 52, said Callahan. Two international members had departed and four have left for Egypt due to family reasons — including the birth of a child to a CRS worker who is eager to return to her mission, he added.

One female CRS staffer, a Gaza native and mother of two young children, remains injured within the Holy Family Catholic Church complex in Gaza City, having been wounded during a Dec. 16, 2023, attack on the compound that killed an elderly woman and her daughter, he said.

"When the Israeli (forces) killed two of the women in the compound, she went to help them and then they threw a device in there, which ended up exploding, and it shattered her legs," Callahan said. "She's had some surgery, but they haven't got all the shrapnel out and they haven't mended it."

His agency's attempts to move the woman out of the country for treatment have so far been unsuccessful, he said.

CRS' Gaza offices have had to relocate from their original Gaza City site — since the team "can't get back into Gaza (City), and the building's windows have been blown out" — to space over an unused grocery store in Rafah, using solar panels to maintain electrical power and internet connections for their work, said Callahan, noting that some colleagues are "living in tents ... with their combined families."

Along with food and water distribution, creating shelter for those in Gaza is "key" amid the "devastating situation," especially as rain and falling temperatures have compounded the misery of those displaced by the hostilities, said Callahan.

"When I was there, the temperature was in the high 40s (Fahrenheit)," he said. "That's pretty cold when you're in a tent."

He recalled seeing a family from the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis — exhausted from their journey, during which they carried all of their belongings — caught in a "pouring rain."

"Their heads were in their hands," said Callahan. "Their mattresses, anything they would sleep on, were just getting soaked. These types of situations are very traumatizing for people."

Sanitation conditions also have worsened, he said, with people "digging latrines ... kind of randomly, (since) the infrastructure in many areas has been bombed."

Callahan said that some medical groups with whom he spoke advised him of "100% diarrhea and dysentery" among those they are seeing.



Sean Callahan, president of Caritas North America and CEO of Catholic Relief Services, in a tan vest, is pictured during his visit to southern Gaza Jan. 23, 2024. (OSV News/Courtesy Catholic Relief Services)

Respiratory ailments are soaring due to inhaling dust from damaged buildings, he said, noting that "there's a lot of cement in the air ... and a lot of people have croup."

Others, like the CRS staffer at Holy Family Parish, are trying to function with injuries that cannot be adequately treated by a failing health system.

"I met one young man who had a fracture in his femur because of one of the buildings coming down," said Callahan. "He actually had an operation, and you can see the metal pins and the metal holding the bone together exposed. He's in a tent, and you can imagine carrying him from the tent to the latrine."

Callahan asked the man, who was a day laborer, how he was faring in terms of getting food.

"He said, '(CRS) gave us a box of food, and when that's gone, I don't know what I'm going to do,' " Callahan recalled. "People are in a desperate situation."

Relief efforts have also been complicated by emerging intelligence data showing that at least 12 staff members of UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, were connected to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack. An estimated 10% of UNRWA's Gaza staff has ties to militant Islamist groups, and about half have close relatives belonging to the groups, according to reports reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Following the revelations, a number of nations — including major donors such as the U.S., Germany, and the European Union — have suspended millions of dollars in UNRWA funding.

Callahan said that CRS, as a matter of policy and in compliance with U.S. government regulations, does not partner with either UNRWA or the Hamas government in Gaza.

"Our vendors have all been reviewed and approved through U.S. government programs," he said. "So we're making sure that we maintain credibility, and that there isn't any doubt of where our aid goes, who gets it and who doesn't."

He added that CRS Gaza has "fortunately not had any problems with violation of our premises or our supplies. We've been giving (aid) to the people and we haven't had any stealing from our trucks or not."

Callahan urged people in the U.S. to "remember the people and keep them in our thoughts and prayers.

"And if you are able to, please provide assistance, because the local church organizations are working night and day with those people most in need," he said.

In the long term, large numbers of amputees, including children, will also need aid, he said.

Even in the face of violence and destruction, Callahan said, "almost everybody" he encountered during his visit "had some hope about the future.

"They were very hopeful that this was going to end," he said. "And I think the most poignant thing was in talking to a few women in our office, who said, 'We just want peace; we want peace for our families.' They weren't harboring revenge or hostility against people. These were people that have gotten trapped in a war ... they were just asking for peace for their families."