News



A worker with Jesuit Refugee Service seen in a 2023 photo offers physical therapy to a woman in Renk, South Sudan, as part of the response to the conflict in Sudan. A pause on U.S. foreign aid is affecting critical programs carried out by nongovernmental organizations like JRS. (OSV News/Courtesy JRS)



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The U.S. State Department has terminated contracts for refugee-related programs with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Jesuit Refugee Service, but attorneys for the bishops called the Feb. 26 action unlawful.

The bishops' conference said in court records last week that the abrupt termination does not change the facts of its lawsuit against the Trump administration, which in January abruptly suspended the federal government's program to resettle refugees who are in the U.S. legally.

Separately, the United States office of Jesuit Refugee Service also learned last week that the State Department had terminated its funding for five of its nine programs — an action that a spokeswoman says will put children at risk of exploitation, trafficking and abusive labor practices.

Nearly 7,000 refugees had been assigned by the government to the bishops' resettlement program under the contracts, court records said, and the government now is failing to pay the conference about $13 million already spent caring for the refugees prior to Jan. 24.

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The funding suspension has already caused harm to Jonathan and Kathleen Crosmer, a Lexington, Kentucky, couple who rent a house in Lexington to a family of Syrian refugees.

A local agency that had assisted the family of five with rent can no longer do so and the Crosmers are absorbing the expenses rather than evict the family. Jonathan Crosmer told the National Catholic Reporter that he and his wife were not going to kick a family "out on the streets."



Jonathan and Kathleen Crosmer of Lexington, Kentucky (Courtesty of Jonathan Crosmer)

"It's a refugee family. They just arrived in the United States a few months ago. They don't have any assets," said Crosmer, who added that the family was able to find other sources of assistance to pay February's rent. But whether they will be able to pay rent in the coming months remains to be seen.

"It's a real chaotic situation," Crosmer said.

In court documents, attorneys for the bishops' conference said the contract termination is an example of the Trump administration's refusal, based on a policy disagreement, to spend funds appropriated by Congress for the purpose of finding homes and jobs for refugees in the country legally.

The termination notice — saying that the bishops' work "no longer effectuates agency priorities" — and the bishops' response were filed in advance of a Friday hearing in the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., where the conference is asking a judge to halt the government's suspension of the program.

U.S. District Judge Trevor McFadden on Feb. 28 heard arguments on the bishops' request that the government halt its actions to pause and cut funds, but McFadden did not immediately rule on the motion. The judge requested additional filings in response to the Feb. 26 State Department letters.

"We are preparing the requested briefing, which will be filed with the court next week," Chieko Noguchi, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told NCR on Feb. 28.



People are pictured in a file photo entering the U.S. Department of State building in Washington. The State Department has terminated its contract with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to legally resettle refugees, following a suspension of the arrangement in January 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Joshua Roberts)

Jesuit Refugee Service was notified Feb. 26 about the terminated funds. They were among approximately 10,000 contracts and grants the Trump administration moved to cancel through the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, known as USAID. Overall, the administration said it is ending nearly $60 billion in foreign aid contracts, including more than nine out of 10 of those arranged through USAID.

President Donald Trump has framed his slashing of foreign aid as a means to address fraud and rein in government spending. The U.S. spends roughly $40 billion on foreign assistance, or less than 1% of the total federal budget.

The canceled agreements will severely impact Jesuit Refugee Services' work in five countries: Chad, Ethiopia, Iraq, Thailand and Uganda.

More than 76,500 people, the majority in Chad and Iraq, will be affected by the loss of U.S. funding for those programs, provided through the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, the Catholic humanitarian group said.

"I can't believe, as a human being and as a Christian, that the people who are taking these actions are fully considering the unintended consequences here," said Bridget Cusick, communications director for Jesuit Refugee Service USA.

The impacted programs provide:

- education to refugee children in Chad;
- protections and foster care for unaccompanied children in Ethiopia;
- medicine and food for displaced people in Iraq;
- medical and housing assistance in Thailand;
- medical and food assistance in Uganda.

Jesuit Fr. Cao Gia, a member of Jesuit Refugee Service, engages children at the Refugee Com

Jesuit Fr. Cao Gia, a member of Jesuit Refugee Service, engages children at the Refugee Community Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The U.S. State Department

terminated JRS funding for its program in Ethiopia to provide protections and foster care for unaccompanied children. (Francesco Malavolta/Jesuit Refugee Service)

About 400 refugee children in Ethiopia were being assisted by Jesuit Refugee Service's child protection program. That work is expected to continue "in dramatically reduced fashion" for the next two months through private donor sources, Cusick said.

"These children are at greater risk of being trafficked, being forced into child labor and all these terrible things that people say they care about," Cusick said. "But these are things that are really going to happen, and that's why it's just very, very hard for us to understand."

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>
> — Bridget Cusick
>
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Five funding deals were canceled despite Jesuit Refugee Service applying for a waiver under the State Department's exemption for lifesaving work. The remaining four agreements, for providing aid in Colombia, India, South Africa and South Sudan, are suspended under the pause.

Jesuit Refugee Service is the humanitarian assistance program of the Society of Jesus, the religious order that counts Pope Francis among its clergy. The service was founded in 1980 by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, then superior general of the Jesuits who died in 1991 and currently a candidate for sainthood.

The Jesuit organization had been bracing for significant impacts on its programming since late January when Trump signed an executive order freezing all foreign aid for 90 days.

At the time, JRS USA said it needed $1.25 million to continue its programs during the freeze. It estimated about 105,000 people would suffer from the aid pause, and another 400,000 people would be indirectly harmed.

Already, Jesuit Refugee Service has laid off 400 of its 11,000 staff across 58 countries due to the president's funding freeze.

Services provided can be critical lifelines for people without jobs, education and social services in their host countries.

The potential loss of funding forced staff in Iraq to decide which was more lifesaving — infant formula or psychiatric care to prevent suicide.



A girl near Mosul, Iraq, plays on a makeshift swing at Hammam Al-Alil camp where displaced Iraqis prepare to be evacuated Nov. 10, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Abdullah Rashid)

The termination of its program in Chad is estimated to directly affect 32,000 people and another 129,000 indirectly. JRS was the United Nations' designated lead on education in the Western African nation in the country's 19 refugee camps that host 1.3 million people forced to flee their homes.

Jesuit Refugee Service is seeking new funding sources to continue its work in the nine countries where it has received U.S. support.

"We're just really trying to work through how we can save as many of these programs and continue to help the people they were benefiting," Cusick said.

On Jan. 24, the bishops' conference received a letter from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration notifying it that its refugee resettlement contracts were "immediately suspended" pending a 90-day review of foreign assistance programs.

The bishops' conference filed a federal lawsuit on Feb. 18, saying the aid pause harmed newly arrived refugees and was a blow to the conference, the largest nongovernmental program to resettle refugees legally in the United States.

In its Feb. 26 letter, the State Department said the refugee resettlement contracts with the bishops' conference were "immediately terminated" as of Feb. 27. The State Department's letter ordered the conference to "stop all work" on the program and not to incur any new costs.

Attorneys for the bishops' conference wrote in their Feb. 27 filing that the funding suspension "continues to inflict irreparable harm."

Fifty of the conference's staff members — more than half of its resettlement staff — have been laid off and more employees are at risk of losing their jobs, the bishops' lawsuit said.

"Refugees may lose access to shelter, food, urgent medical care, English-language learning, job-training, and other services during their first days in the country," the Feb. 18 lawsuit states.

> "If government funding can disappear on a dime, it does not make sense for us to keep this program running."
>
> — Jason Brown

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Catholic Charities agencies in Virginia, Missouri and Texas said they have been forced to lay off staff and begin shutting down their refugee programs, the heads of those agencies said in declarations.

"If government funding can disappear on a dime, it does not make sense for us to keep this program running," said Jason Brown, chief executive officer of Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Virginia.

Since 1980, the U.S. bishops conference has helped resettle more than 930,000 refugees under the government program.

El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz said the conference's "deeply held religious beliefs" are what have motivated the conference to operate the country's largest refugee resettlement agency.

"Our refugee resettlement efforts are an expression of the Gospel's mandates to 'love thy neighbor' and 'welcome the stranger,' and are core to the USCCB's mission to organize and conduct the religious, charitable and social welfare work of the Catholic Church in the United States," Seitz said in a document supporting the lawsuit.