News
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Workers unload food supplies from Catholic Relief Services and USAID.

Workers unload food supplies from Catholic Relief Services and USAID in the village of Behera, near Tulear, Madagascar, Oct. 22, 2016. The Trump administration this year has cut about $60 billion in aid to humanitarian projects around the world. (OSV News/Catholic Relief Services/Nancy McNally)



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The Trump administration's cuts to humanitarian aid have resulted in deaths around the world and are hampering Catholic charity organizations' global work, such as support services for Rohingya refugee camps and an AIDS prevention program in Africa.

The fallout from the country's abrupt pullback of roughly $60 billion in aid is compelling Catholic charity groups to rethink how they approach their humanitarian work. It's also sowing concern among some organizations that they might have to close shop altogether, charity officials said.

More than 100 people are dying each hour because of the Trump administration's cuts to humanitarian aid, according to Impact Tracker, a database started by Brooke Nichols, associate professor of global health at the Boston University School of Public

Health. (The tracker includes cuts to some Medicaid programs.)

As of midday June 7, 104,382 adults and 217,808 children worldwide had died because of the cuts, according to the tracker.

If aid is not restored by the end of the year, more than 176,000 additional adults and children around the world could die from HIV and at least 62,000 additional people could die from tuberculosis, according to the tracker's estimates.

One initiative no longer getting funding is the American Global AIDS program in Cameroon, said Bill O'Keefe, CRS' executive vice president for mission, mobilization and advocacy. He said CRS worked on implementing this program that began under former President George W. Bush in 2003, and helped build it before turning the reins over to a local church.

"It's sad for the church because … they've worked so hard to build this capacity to serve their people," O'Keefe said. "It's just really, really tragic."

> 'There's been a lot of confusion.'
> —Bill O'Keefe
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The funding cuts have resulted in deaths not only of people unable to get treatment for HIV from stalled efforts to address malnutrition in some of CRS' food programs, O'Keefe said.

Also, three of five CRS projects in Sudan — focusing on health, livelihood and food security that were reaching more than 600,000 people — have been canceled, the organization said in a global emergency update last month. In Haiti, one program CRS was working on was rescinded and another terminated. The two programs provided education and food.

In the same update, the agency noted that despite the pullback of aid, private donations have enabled it to resume some of its humanitarian work in the Democratic Republic of Congo geared toward helping people in the eastern region of the country impacted by violence.

The Trump administration has pushed back on claims that people have died because of the pullback in aid. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a Catholic, said at a congressional hearing last month that people have not died as a result of the funding cuts.

Trump last month also commented on the cuts, saying they are "devastating" and adding that "hopefully a lot of people are going to start spending a lot of money."

Marco Rubio

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a Catholic, testifies at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington May 20. (OSV News/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

Because of the cuts to aid funding, the United Nations — which serves as a sort of middle agent for sending humanitarian aid to other groups — is trying to focus on helping the neediest 100 million people in the world, said Alistair Dutton, secretary general of Caritas Internationalis. The group coordinates work among its 164 member organizations, including CRS. That's only roughly a third of the number of people who need assistance; Dutton said 300 million people at the beginning of the year were considered in urgent need of humanitarian help.

Also impacted by the loss of funding is Caritas Bangladesh, which had been operating programs for Rohingya refugees. Charity workers can no longer provide support services like water and sanitation and shelter, according to Dutton. The organization had worked on making the hilly camps safer for the rainy season, when the clay landscape gets slippery for people to navigate, Dutton said.

CRS' O'Keefe also said funding has been cut for Shared Future, a program launched during the first Trump administration to help Christian minorities in northern Iraq support themselves financially with training and education. That assistance was designed to help people at risk of migration or of joining extremist organizations, he said.

A village woman greets a Catholic Relief Services worker in Tanzania.

A village woman greets a Catholic Relief Services worker in Ipwizi, Tanzania, as CRS celebrates its 60th year working in Tanzania in March 2023. (OSV News/Catholic Relief Services/Carlos Barrio)

In addition to the effects on the ground, O'Keefe said, CRS is also grappling with changes in the federal workforce at home. CRS, for example, had a government official the organization could talk to who had approval power related to aid programs, but that changed overnight.

"There's been a lot of confusion," O'Keefe said. "The people at USAID who are left have been unbelievably professional in trying to do the best they can, but it's been very chaotic."

The full picture of the effects on humanitarian aid and what U.S. support will look like going forward still isn't totally clear. The Trump administration announced in April that USAID's Office of Inspector General would review foreign aid programs "to inform the realignment of foreign assistance programs and functions under the Department of State" in the hopes of finding "key lessons from prior oversight work that are relevant."

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European countries have pulled back on humanitarian aid in recent years. The United Kingdom said earlier this year that it will invest a smaller percentage of its gross national income on humanitarian aid to increase its spending on defense, and France, Belgium and the Netherlands are also aiming to cut aid.

Caritas' Dutton said some of European countries' cuts to aid are happening over a yearslong span, as opposed to the fast-paced U.S. cuts. He said his organization is still trying to determine what the current humanitarian aid situation looks like, and how things will look in the future for this work.

"That's going to be something we're going to have to discern over the next couple of years, I guess, as the picture becomes clearer," Dutton said. "We're just going to have to fight on all fronts to work out what the current need and current situation is, who's still around," he said.

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