

Flurry of crises test relief groups

By Bill Pritchard
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — As the world experiences a season of disasters, Catholic church agencies are at work helping to provide relief to the victims of crises ranging from war's destruction in Iraq to cyclones in Bangladesh.

Here is a roundup of major crisis zones and the response of Catholic relief agencies.

• **The Middle East** — From north to south, Iraq continues to reel from its losing confrontation with the Arab-Western alliance after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

In the north, Iraqi Kurds fleeing Iraqi troops are starving and dying of disease on largely barren mountainsides.

In the heartland of the country, Iraqis are trying to recover from the bombing, which left vital public services in ruins. Officials also fear an outbreak of cholera and other diseases. Medicine is scarce in some places.

Catholic Relief Services, the Pontifical Commission for Palestine, Franciscan sisters, Iraqi religious and the Catholic Near East Welfare Association have joined to truck medicine and food into the country to be distributed through church channels.

Pope John Paul II met with Iraqi Catholic leaders in early May to assess the damage and the needs of their people.

The president of the U.S. Catholic Con-

ference, Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, urged Catholics in early May to give financial support through CRS for refugee relief and also urged longer-term political solutions.

Eastern-rite Chaldean Catholics in the United States have also begun relief funds. Five members of the Chaldean Catholic community in Detroit traveled to Jordan to purchase relief goods for Iraq.

Iraq has an ancient Chaldean Catholic population in the north.

• **Asia** — Bangladesh was devastated by wind and flood in late April. Winds reached 145 miles per hour and giant waves engulfed heavily populated islands at the head of the Gulf of Bengal. The death toll was estimated at 125,000 and rising. Millions were left homeless.

Before the cyclone struck, the country was already faced with an epidemic of diarrhea brought on partly by severe drought. The drought had left many Bangladeshis with only polluted water to drink and no firewood with which to boil the water and render it safe.

An international aid response has included Catholic agencies such as the British church's Catholic Agency For Overseas Development, the Scottish church relief fund, and the Irish Catholic agency Trocaire.

Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, which already has nine houses in Bangladesh, rushed additional sisters to the disaster zone to offer assistance.

• **Africa** — War and famine in the Sudan and Ethiopia continue to take lives and place civilians in desperate situations, even as world attention focuses on more recent crises such as the Bangladesh cyclone.

Catholic Relief Services, the Vatican and local church organizations have been providing continual food and other relief in those countries, in the face of governments which sometimes seem to deny there's a

problem.

In the Sudan, local bishops in both rebel and government-held zones have been coordinating relief programs, as well as appealing to the world not to forget their people.

The war pits the mostly Muslim, Arab north against the Christian and animist black African south.

In West Africa, the nation of Liberia continues to suffer from civil war. The unrest has left the capital, Monrovia, without food or public services.

Catholic Relief Services has continued to provide food aid to Liberians displaced or left without resources by the troubles.

CRS was the last aid agency to evacuate the capital last year at the height of the fighting, which pitted rival rebel factions against each other as well as the now-fallen government of the late President Samuel Doe.

Recently, Liberians began planting new crops with seeds donated by CRS. Officials hope a serious food shortage driven by the war will soon begin easing.

• **South America** — The cholera epidemic which struck Peru now threatens that country's neighbors. Its potential for devastation among the Amazonian Indian tribes of Brazil, who are especially vulnerable to the disease, has been particularly worrisome to Catholic agencies and clergy.

In Peru, the epidemic has been worst in the poor urban neighborhoods where crowding, poor sanitation and inadequate medical services have combined to open the residents to the disease.

Catholic agencies in the South American countries, as well as overseas Catholic relief organizations, are working to aid the current victims and prevent other populations from being struck by the epidemic.

More than 1,200 Peruvians were reported to have been killed by cholera.



AP/Wide World Photos
DEPORTED — A young man is reunited with his grandmother who was among those deported from the Armenian village of Gedashen. The two were flown into Yerevan airport in Armenia May 7 from Stepanakert, the capital of the Nagorno-Karabagh region in Azerbaijan.

Pope

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the bullet that critically wounded him 10 years ago, also on May 13. The bullet fragment was placed in the jeweled crown atop the shrine statue of Our Lady of Fatima.

The shrine grounds became an undulating sea of white handkerchiefs waved by the crowd when the pope appeared.

Well over 500,000 people held up lit candles during the recitation of the rosary.

"This enormous multitude of pilgrims with the candles of faith lit and the rosary in their hands confirms that I have reached Fatima," the pope said.

The pope quickly set the Marian tone of his visit in a May 10 arrival speech in the capital of Lisbon.

The aim of the trip was "to head for Fatima, for a second time to thank Our Lady for the protection given the church in these years, which have registered rapid and profound social transformations," the pope said.

These changes show "that new hopes are opening for many people oppressed by an atheistic ideology which impeded the practice of the faith," he added.

The pope told Christians to avoid gloom-and-doom assessments about "the disturbances which burn here and there" causing a subversion of values. Instead, Christians must take advantage of the changes occurring throughout the world to refurbish the Christian foundations of societies, he said in Lisbon.

"This is not an old world which is ending; this is a new world which has begun," he said.

"A new dawn seems to be surging in the sky of history, inviting Christians to be the light and salt of a world which has enormous need of Christ," he added.

In Lisbon, the pope expressed "my gratitude for the special protection of the Virgin Mother who saved my life in the assassination attempt 10 years ago."

Pope John Paul II was seriously wounded in the attempt. Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turk, was captured at the scene of crime and is currently serving a life sentence in Italy.

A year after Agca's assassination attempt, the pope visited Fatima to thank Mary for saving his life, but the event was marred by a second assassination attempt,

which left the pope unhurt.

The pope also tied his reasons for visiting the Marian shrine to the overall message of the Fatima apparitions, which he said was "an invitation to conversion, to purification from sin, to prayer and to holiness in life."

The pope's emphasis on Marian devotion drew immediate criticism from a Portuguese Protestant leader who said it would hurt ecumenical contacts.

The pope came "exactly to underline the cult which most divides the church of Christ," wrote Manuel P. Cardoso, secretary general of the Portuguese Council of Churches, in a bylined newspaper article appearing the day after the pope arrived.

"I understand some concessions to popular piety, but to transport the pope to Portugal with Fatima as the principal motive leaves perplexed those of us who pray for Christian unity," he said.

Mary should be honored as "blessed among women" but "to turn her into the object of a cult and the center of devotion is too much," he said.

At the May 12 evening prayer service in Fatima, the pope asked Portuguese to persist in their Marian devotion because it helps bring people closer to the "incomprehensible richness of Christ."

"Help us in this desert without God, where our generation and the generation of our children seem to be lost," the pope told hundreds of thousands of people gathered at the shrine.

Mary also was asked to bless the special Synod of Bishops for Europe to meet at the end of the year. The aim of the synod is to foster cooperation and joint pastoral planning among the Catholic churches of Eastern and Western Europe.

Before Mass on May 13, the pope met Sister Lucia dos Santos, an 84-year-old cloistered Carmelite nun and the only survivor of the three children who saw the Fatima apparitions. They talked alone for 12 minutes, and the Vatican released no information about their conversation.

The previous night, the pope had visited the tombs — located in the shrine church — of the other two children.

During the homily of the May 13 Mass, the pope pleaded against abortion and asked the Portuguese to combat the "reigning anti-birth mentality."

The pope spoke strongly against abortion in his 1982 visit, but Portugal legalized the procedure in 1984.

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