

Priest: Some Iraqis are selling their kidneys

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Three years after the Persian Gulf War, economic desperation is so bad in Iraq that some of its citizens are selling their kidneys for cash, a church official said.

The organ sales are just one sign of the deep suffering caused by a U.N.-backed economic embargo against Iraq, which has changed the face of the country forever, said U.S. Father William Corcoran, director of the Pontifical Mission for Palestine office in Amman, Jordan.

Father Corcoran was at the Vatican Jan. 25-26 for a meeting of major Catholic funding agencies, which approved some \$530,000 in economic projects for Iraq. Most are church-related construction initiatives that will bring welcome capital and jobs into local areas.

Father Corcoran said the economy has reached a catastrophic dimension for many average Iraqis over the last year, as inflation has skyrocketed and the value of the country's currency has collapsed. A can of powdered milk, for example, now costs a month's salary.

"People live off government rationing coupons, they grow things and they try to find as much charity as they can. At this point, the middle class is just decimated," he said.

This has made the sale of a kidney an attractive option for many. Father Corcoran said private hospitals in Baghdad are paying about \$400 per kidney. The organs are either used for foreigners who travel to Iraq for transplants or are shipped out of the country, he said.

The \$400 earned through the sale could keep a family alive for a year in Iraq, Father Corcoran said. But there

are hidden dangers.

Organ donors don't always realize that "if they become sick from the surgery, there's no way they can buy antibiotics to ward off infection," he said.

The priest said the food supply situation in Iraq has actually improved over the last year, largely because of increased trade with Iran and increased smuggling. But the money crisis means more and more families cannot afford to buy foodstuffs, he said.

Especially worrisome is that children

born and growing up in the postwar period are showing large-scale signs of retardation and deformities related to malnutrition.

"I'm afraid Iraq is going to have a generation of physically and mentally handicapped children. Even when the embargo ends, the effects are going to be long-lasting," Father Corcoran said.

The Pontifical Mission for Palestine also helps sponsor medical aid to Iraq, and the church programs are appreciated, he said. He noted that a newspaper

run by Saddam Hussein's son recently praised Christian aid efforts and wondered why world Muslim organizations had not done more of the same.

The construction projects were approved at the Vatican meeting of the Societies for Aid to Eastern Churches, which includes the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and Catholic Relief Services from the United States.

Among the projects were renovation of two Chaldean-rite churches in Basra that were heavily damaged in the war.

Showing solidarity



AP/Wide World Photos

Nobel laureate sides with Mayan Indians

Rigoberta Menchu, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, recently expressed her solidarity with the indigenous people of Chiapas. An amnesty law to peacefully end Mexico's new year rebellion by some 2,000 Mayan-Indians is nearing Senate approval. A rebel leader ridiculed the idea, saying that conditions for peace talks were not yet complete. The government has designated Bishop Samuel Ruiz (right) to help mediate the conflict.

Professor says media is trying alleged abusers

By Ann Gonyea
Catholic News Service

MARQUETTE, Mich. — How the press presents allegations of sexual abuse by Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago and pop star Michael Jackson, and alleged marital infidelities by President Clinton, may be bringing judgments of guilt on people who haven't even been charged with a crime.

"While I do have a good deal of faith in the legal system, I also know the media plays a significant role in how the public makes a judgment," said Michael Marsden, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Northern Michigan University in Marquette.

Gerald Waite, a Northern Michigan journalism professor, believes the problem in Cardinal Bernardin's case is "the press tends to see the church in very limited terms."

"It can't deal with serious religious issues. It never has," Waite said. "It likes to deal with contemporary issues and there's no question child abuse is a hot issue."

Waite, a member of St. Michael Parish in Marquette, used the example of Bishop James H. Garland's recent arrival in the diocese.

"What did journalists ask him about? Abortion, child abuse and the role of women in the church," Waite said, told the *U.P. Catholic*, newspaper of the Marquette diocese in the state's Upper Peninsula. While these issues are important, they are not the only issues in the church, he said.

"The press has an enormous amount

of responsibility for reporting this accurately and fairly," said Marsden, a member of St. Peter Cathedral Parish in Marquette. "The outcome of this will have an enormous impact on the Catholic Church."

He warned that the spreading of allegations without specific proofs to back them up brings society "dangerously close" to a new era of McCarthyism.

"The days of Joe McCarthy are not that far behind us," Marsden told the

U.P. Catholic. "One of Joe McCarthy's tricks was to go after pretty prominent people — without any specific evidence. He got away with it for years."

Regardless of the sexual misconduct issues the church has dealt with of late, Marsden questions whether the allegations by Cardinal Bernardin's accuser, Steven Cook, would have received so much play had they been made against someone other than the cardinal.

Even if Cook's claims are shown to be

false in court, it may be difficult for Cardinal Bernardin to recover his reputation.

"A person's reputation is blackened by charges like this, there's no doubt about it," Waite said.

"Assuming this goes through the courts and Cardinal Bernardin is shown to be innocent, there's still always going to be the suspicion," Marsden added.

"It feeds into anti-Catholic ... anti-clerical biases ... A lot will depend on how he handles it and how the press handles it."

Leader wants to see evidence of death squads

SAN SALVADOR (CNS) — Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani has challenged Catholic officials to provide evidence backing their allegations that right-wing death squads are still operating in El Salvador.

On Jan. 23, Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador reiterated earlier charges that the death squads, accused of murdering thousands of suspected leftists during the long civil war, were still active.

"The most logical thing would be for them to send their evidence to the National Civil Police.... That would be the normal thing to do instead of simply making public declarations," Cristiani told a news conference Jan. 24.

"If church officials have details or any conclusive proof, they should come forward with it, he said. "We are all worried about the violence."

Cristiani said police were investigating the assassination the previous week

of Panamanian Alberto Perdomo of the Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Cooperation, an agency of the Organization of American States.

Perdomo's family has accused Salvadoran soldiers of shooting him as he rode with his wife in a car in the central province of Cuscatlan.

The killing was one of several linked to suspected far-right death squads since the 12-year civil war ended in January 1992.