

Relief services

Continued from page 1

throughout El Salvador's civil war between leftist and rightist factions, the agency provided non-partisan humanitarian aid and, as a result, gained enough trust to play an important part in reconstruction activities following the peace accord signed in January, 1992.

This trust allows CRS "to not only provide humanitarian aid and developmental assistance (through 20 Salvadoran agencies), but also to foster a climate where former enemies can reconcile and collaborate in rebuilding their nation," the agency claimed in its annual report.

CRS also takes care to avoid being drawn into the more questionable policies of some of the nations it assists, Johns stressed.

During the 1980s, for example, the Ethiopian government asked the agency to help relocate its citizens away from the rebellious Eritrea region into other parts of the country, Johns pointed out. He added that the agency saw the relocation as designed to weaken potential political opposition by Eritreans to the government.

"We wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole," he noted.

A similar request of equally dubious motivation from the Indonesian government received the same response, he said. He added that CRS did help the Indonesians with a voluntary relocation program designed to ease urban overcrowding that carried no political overtones.

CRS prefers, whenever possible, to bypass governmental agencies and programs all together and deliver aid to people as directly as possible, he said. One of the reasons CRS can network directly with people all over the world is the near-universal presence of the Catholic church, Johns explained.

"We look toward the local church as the partner of preference," he said.

To exemplify his point, Johns pointed out that the Catholic Church, along

with other Christian churches in Ethiopia, collaborated with CRS in providing famine relief in 1984.

"Many NGOs don't have that natural counterpart," he said.

Such a relationship with local churches allows CRS to keep its administrative costs among the lowest of any relief agency in the country, he said.

Indeed, in 1991, *Money* magazine listed CRS as the relief agency with the third-lowest overhead in the United States; just 6.9 percent of its funds were spent on administration. That figure was reduced even further in 1992 to 5.8 percent.

CRS grew out of the U.S. bishops' efforts to provide relief to the inhabitants and refugees of war-torn Europe in 1943. Originally called War Relief Services - National Catholic Welfare Conference, the agency embodied the U.S. bishops' desire to consolidate the work of various relief committees raising monies at that time.

After the war ended, CRS, which took its current name in 1955, continued to

stress relief efforts. But the agency also began to concentrate on measures designed to develop the economic and social structures many nations needed to end poverty.

The agency is now as likely to be found helping a village banking project in Guatemala get off the ground, or aiding farmers with technical training in Lebanon, as it is to be found airlifting food and medical supplies to the various war zones and disaster areas around the world.

In terms of its most recent relief efforts, CRS has targeted a number of the planet's most dangerous regions. In particular, the former Yugoslavia has received the following types of assistance from CRS.

- CRS will buy locally manufactured shoes this winter to give to 5,000 Bosnian children in the besieged city of Sarajevo.

- Through the Dora Foundation, CRS will provide support to 200 Bosnian orphans living with foster families in the region. The goal is to minimize the chil-

dren's trauma by not removing them from their homeland.

- Working in Zagreb, Croatia, with its Catholic counterpart, Caritas, and its Muslim counterpart, Merhamet, CRS will distribute \$20 million worth of food.

- CRS is also aiding refugees in Macedonia and Kosovo, and monitoring the effects of discrimination against the Albanian majority by Serbian authorities in Kosovo.

Despite its presence in so many nations, CRS does have to pull back from its efforts from time to time, Johns explained.

In late 1992, for example, the southwest African nation of Angola degenerated into civil strife after one of the political parties refused to accept the results of an election. CRS was compelled to pull out because the violence was simply too intense for the agency's staff to carry out its work, he said.

"We don't want our people holed up in an apartment while people are shooting each other in the street," he concluded.

Catholics help hungry here, abroad

What do soup kitchens in Rochester, food pantries in Geneva and food cupboards in Trumansburg have in common with watershed projects in India and grain-storage programs in Haiti?

They all benefit from the sacrifices diocesan Catholics make during Lent on behalf of Operation Rice Bowl.

The annual family-based program of prayer, fasting and almsgiving is sponsored by Catholic Relief Services and began on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 16.

Since its inception in 1976, Operation Rice Bowl has raised more than \$50 million for programs to increase food production, according to information provided by CRS, the overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. bishops.

The agency notes that it chose a rice bowl as the symbol for its efforts because "Third World poverty is so grinding that as many as two-thirds of the people who live there exist on only half a bowl of rice a day." The program urges U.S. families to fast for one meal each week, or eat a smaller meal, and donate the money they would have spent to CRS.

Three-quarters of the funds raised go to CRS projects abroad, while the rest is used within the family's parish to help the poor locally.

Judy Taylor, diocesan coordinator for CRS, said the 1993 Operation Rice Bowl effort here raised more than \$74,000. Of that money, more than \$56,000 was given to CRS, with more than \$18,000 remaining in the diocese for various programs.

Regional committees decide where Rice Bowl monies are to be allocated, Taylor added. More than \$10,000 went

1994
OPERATION RICE BOWL
Prayer, Education, Fasting
& Almsgiving

to anti-hunger efforts in Monroe County while more than \$700 went to the Livingston County Coalition of Churches.

Meanwhile, various hunger relief efforts re-



Catholic Relief Services
CRS staff members regularly help families like the Romeros, who posed for this picture in January.



Catholic Relief Services
Rural Honduran boys such as this one in a photo taken in January are benefiting from CRS training initiatives in health and agriculture.

ceived more than \$3,500 in the Finger Lakes region while more than \$4,200 was donated to Southern Tier hunger relief projects, she added.

CRS uses its share of Operation Rice Bowl monies to fund such projects as the Credit and Agricultural Training Project in Montecristi, Dominican Republic.

According to CRS, the project is an alternative for small-plot farmers and landless peasants who might otherwise have to borrow money from local loan sharks who charge as much as 100-percent interest on their loans.

Through Operation Rice Bowl's support, CRS was capable of committing \$62,714 to low-interest loans and agricultural training for three dozen farming families. When those farmers pay their loans, the credit fund can make loans to another three dozen families.

The credit fund is managed by a local farmers' association.

About 60 diocesan parishes are participating in Operation Rice Bowl this year, Taylor said.

- Rob Cullivan

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