

African crises

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few of its successes.

On the pessimistic end of the African spectrum, ongoing ethnic conflict in this region continues to frustrate many CRS officials.

In 1994, for example, TV viewers became well-acquainted with the heart-breaking images of Rwandans fleeing genocide, and a bloody civil war between the minority Tutsis and the majority Hutus in their native land.

Unfortunately, such scenes may find their way back on television screens soon — only this year such images could emanate from Rwanda's southern neighbor, Burundi, which Rwanda borders.

"The setting in Burundi is like it was in Rwanda pre-April 1994," observed Pat Johns, coordinator for Africa for CRS. "At the drop of a hat, we could be pulling our people out."

CRS is currently working on the difficult task of persuading thousands of Rwandans to leave refugee camps in neighboring nations and return to their country, he said. Meanwhile, CRS is promoting church efforts to stave off the kind of disaster that could create a similar refugee flood from Burundi, Johns added.

In a phone interview from the agency's Baltimore, Md. office, Johns noted that — as was the case with Rwanda last April — the minority Tutsis and majority Hutus who comprise Burundi's population are on the verge of civil war.

Johns explained that some Tutsis in Burundi would like to avenge the Hutu-perpetrated slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis last year in Rwanda. Meanwhile, organized armed bands of Hutus are ready to confront Burundi's Tutsi-controlled military, he continued.

"No one is the main aggressor in this," Johns said.

Johns added that, in hindsight, many Rwandan Catholics wish the church had done more to prevent the slaughter that took place in their country. The church was devastated by the civil war which saw many religious and priests killed, including three of the nation's nine bishops.

"The power of the pulpit is crucial," Johns said. "It was not there in Rwanda."

Now, as trouble mounts in Burundi, Johns expressed little hope that the Catholic Church could head off another brutal conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis, both of whom are mainly Catholic. He admitted that reconciling the two ethnic groups seems impossible



File photo
A 1993 military coup in Burundi, Rwanda's southern neighbor, drove tens of thousands of Burundis, such as the ones shown above, into Rwanda. Now, Catholic Relief Services officials fear that deteriorating relations between Burundi's minority Tutsis and majority Hutus could lead to the similar kind of massive violence that devastated Rwanda last year.

at times, and noted that a Burundi bishop working for peace recently survived an assassination attempt.

"There are people that don't want to see reconciliation," Johns said.

But as they lament the poisonous stew brewing in Burundi, Johns and other CRS officials can at least drink in the fresh waters of hope flowing in the neighboring nations of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

After years of civil war between Ethiopia's central government and the Eritreans in the north, Eritrea became an independent nation in May, 1993. The war's end has enabled both nations to begin rebuilding themselves with the help of such agencies as CRS, remarked Johns, who recently returned from an Ethiopian symposium on the 10th anniversary of the 1984-85 famine.

Peace has also enabled both nations to take on such tasks as reforestation and environmental stabilization, while establishing better health care and



File photo
Ethiopians like this mother and her child once faced severe famine compounded by civil war. However, the nation is now slowly rebuilding itself.

education, Johns commented.

"The climate is such now where things can be done to solve longer-term problems," he said.

Johns illustrated peace's benefits by noting that a severe drought threatened to bring famine back to Ethiopia last

year — one on the scale that killed one million people in the mid-1980s. However, Ethiopia's relatively stable situation enabled agencies such as CRS to work with government officials to head off mass starvation.

The drought led to the deaths of 40,000-50,000 people, a tragedy Johns acknowledged, but, nonetheless, one far smaller in scope than would have taken place if the drought had been compounded by war, he concluded.

Ethiopia's and Eritrea's current resurgence, however, are threatened by the possibility of deep cuts in foreign aid, cuts primarily sought by misinformed U.S. politicians and voters, according to Michael Frank, director of project resource management at CRS.

Frank cited a recent survey in which most respondents thought the United States spent between 15-20 percent of its budget on foreign aid. When told the actual figure was less than one percent of the total federal budget, most respondents concluded that that amount was too little, he claimed.

About two-thirds of Catholic Relief Services' \$300 million budget comes from the U.S. government, which commonly uses private relief agencies to administer its relief and development funds. The other third of the agency's budget comes from such private donors as Catholics who contribute to Operation Rice Bowl during Lent (please see accompanying story.)

Frank noted that the United States has cut food aid by 20 percent in the last three years, and that CRS expects even deeper slashes this year. Although the United States will continue to provide such emergency funds as those that go to famine relief, he added development funds earmarked for long-term projects in needy nations will probably be cut severely.

Both Frank and Johns are worried that development projects in such nations as Ethiopia and Eritrea may suffer big cuts just when these nations are getting back on their feet.

Frank added that relief and development agencies such as CRS may have to resort to parceling out their development funds only to those nations with the best chance of surviving, at the expense of those countries suffering more precarious situations.

"It's a bad choice," Frank remarked.

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