

Appeal aims to help vulnerable in Middle East during pandemic

If the Church isn't there for displaced and refugee Christians in the Middle East, nobody else is going to protect these impoverished and persecuted minorities from COVID-19.

This basic truth and a nudge from Pope Francis has CNEWA (Catholic Near East Welfare Association) Canada re-organizing its 2020 budget and raising funds to help Church organizations in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and elsewhere meet the virus head on.



Carl Hetu

“The world is suffering,” said CNEWA Canada executive director Carl Hétu. “The poor, as always, are the ones who will suffer the most.”

Because the United Nations humanitarian aid system bypasses faith-based institutions, highly effective Christian organizations are left out of aid efforts responding to COVID-19, said Stephen Rasche, an American lawyer working for the Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda of Erbil, Iraq.

“In the case of CNEWA, they have been doing honest, substantive work in the Mideast since the 1920s, and while their financial capacity may be comparatively limited as compared to governments, their effectiveness is far greater in terms of impact of dollars spent,” Rasche wrote in an e-mail from Iraq.

“This stems from the mission-driven focus of Church-based organizations such as CNEWA, as opposed to the more process-driven focus of much of the government-backed international aid paradigm.”

For the organizations on the ground which CNEWA funds, COVID-19 is truly an invisible enemy. Throughout the region testing is limited or unavailable, authoritarian regimes are suppressing information and health systems are in disarray.

“The entire health system (of Syria) has been destroyed in the war,” said Hétu. “So how can you really know what’s going on?”

In Iraq, under the cover of COVID-19 lockdown orders, powerful political players are using the police and armed forces to round up the leaders of protest movements who were calling for non-sectarian, secular and honest government.

“Now the regime is using this isolation to go after the leaders of the demonstrations – putting them in jail, torturing them, killing them. That’s what’s going on right now,” said Hétu.

“For the Christians, it (COVID-19) is just another weight on top of everything else they’ve experienced in the last 15 to 17 years. It’s another blow.”

COVID-19 is a very real threat to refugees in Beirut and throughout Lebanon, Hétu said.

“If you go to Beirut, everything is close to one another. All the housing is close. You just get out in the street and you’re all together. To do social distancing is impossible.”

There are about one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon and about 15,000 Iraqi Christians who have been languishing in Beirut’s poorer quarters for years. Part of why Church networks are effective in the Middle East is that they are relatively free from corruption, said Rasche.

“Corruption is certainly an endemic problem in the Middle East,” Rasche wrote.

Church institutions are relatively lean and transparent when compared to the foreign aid apparatus of Western governments, according to Rasche.

“Overhead costs routinely reach 40 per cent or more (in Western aid organizations), with much of that going to pay Western-based salaries,” said Rasche. “In contrast, for the Church efforts in Iraq, we routinely saw overheads of less than five per cent, with outcomes for the people that were significantly more effective.”

Hétu believes the effectiveness of CNEWA’s partners in the Middle East is a matter of their long-term commitment and attachment to the people and region. “When the crisis is over, they (international aid agencies) leave as fast as

they came, because their governments reduce or cut funding,” Hétu said. “They go where the next crisis is... We are stuck with fixing things up.” Even though Canadians have lost jobs and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, those who can are responding to CNEWA’s appeal, said Hétu. “I think many of them were just waiting for us to say, ‘Now is the time to give in those places.’ They are responding well,” he said.