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CRS forced to close food program in Darfur

by Catholic News Service

BALTIMORE -- Catholic Relief Services announced that it will be forced to close its food program in the Sudanese state of Western Darfur at the end of March.

A statement from CRS headquarters in Baltimore did not list a reason for the program's closure, and a CRS spokeswoman in Baltimore said March 28 the agency would not comment further.

However, the previous day, Sara Fajardo, CRS spokeswoman in Africa, told Agence France-Presse that the Sudanese government had asked CRS to leave because it said it could not guarantee staffers' security. CRS remained in Darfur in 2009 when the government expelled 13 other aid agencies.

"One of their (government's) claims was that we were distributing Bibles. This is completely wrong. It is against all our operating principles," Fajardo said. "We are a humanitarian organization whose work is based on need and not creed. The majority of our staff in Darfur are Muslim."

In mid-January, more than a dozen CRS workers were evacuated from a remote area of Western Darfur to the Sudanese capital of Khartoum with the help of the United Nations after receiving "indications of threats." CRS, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency, has not resumed its operations since then.

The threats and evacuation came less than two weeks after the start of an independence referendum in Southern Sudan in which voters overwhelmingly voted to separate from the North. CRS worked to support programs, such as peace-building initiatives and distribution of radios to people, so they could educate themselves about the referendum.

CRS has worked in Sudan since 1972 and first began responding to the Darfur crisis in 2004. The agency said if it closes its food program, more than 400,000 people will be without food aid.

"We call upon the Sudanese government to immediately restore the flow of food aid to the people of West Darfur by either allowing us to resume our service, or urgently finding an alternative," said CRS President Ken Hackett.

Without permission to return to Darfur, CRS said it will be forced to close all other programs, including basic education, school construction, emergency shelter, agricultural promotion, veterinary assistance, water and sanitation supply, and peace building.

In mid-March, U.N. officials said more than 70,000 people had fled fighting in Darfur, increasing the numbers of displaced. Officials said one camp near El Fasher had approximately 170,000 displaced Sudanese.

The agency's work in Darfur began after two insurgent groups largely aligned with African farming communities formed to fight what they claimed was the region's historical marginalization from the Arab-dominated central government, as well as to lay their claim for a rightful share of the region's mineral wealth.

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The government responded by arming Arab nomads, ostensibly to counter the threat of the insurgency. Yet Arab militias -- known as Janjaweed, or "devils on horseback" -- also turned their weapons against innocent civilians.

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