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## Bishops defend Catholic Relief Services amid barrage of attacks

by Brian Roewe

[**Editor's Note:** *This story has been updated with comments from Catholic Relief Services.*]

The U.S. bishops sought to bring relief this week to their own international humanitarian aid agency, which has endured more than a month of allegations of distributing contraceptives in Africa.

The work of Catholic Relief Services around the world "makes us all proud," a Tuesday joint statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops read. The affirmation of the mission of the agency, currently celebrating its 70th anniversary, comes as a reinforcement to its own self-defense efforts in withstanding a barrage of accusations that it promoted abortion and family planning programs in Madagascar and Guinea.

The agency's staff were heartened by the bishops' support, Joan Rosenhauer, CRS executive vice president of U.S. operations told *NCR*, though she said it was unfortunate that responses to the accusations continue to divert attention from their primary focus.

"The needs of the poor around the world do not disappear because someone has decided to attack our work. Our staff and partners continue their mission, always cognizant of, and inspired by, our Catholic identity," Rosenhauer told *NCR* in an emailed statement.

In late July, the Population Research Institute began releasing a series of reports that said it discovered Catholic Relief Services of Madagascar had used funds to distribute contraceptive and abortifacient drugs and devices through partnerships with population-control organizations. A separate report from LifeSiteNews.com a week earlier criticized the agency for providing a \$2.79 million grant for a malaria program in Guinea to Population Services International, an organization that includes family planning in

its programs.

Soon after the reports became public, other groups joined in the condemnations, including the American Life League, which has targeted other social justice-focused agencies in recent months, including Catholic Charities USA and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

"CRS says that it would never fund an organization like Planned Parenthood because it has a threshold in terms of what it will fund. But, when CRS gives \$2.8 million dollars to Population Services International, it does so knowing that the preponderance of PSI's work is population control," said Michael Hichborn, a project director for the league, in an Aug. 20 statement.

"Somebody has to get fired over this. We fight groups like PSI all over the world and now we find our own church funds them. It's disgusting and for one I am bone-weary of these types of revelations. Heads should roll," Austin Ruse, president of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, told LifeSiteNews.com in mid-July.

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On Wednesday, the editors of LifeSiteNews.com called for the U.S. bishops to dissolve the agency.

But for more than a month, CRS has responded to similar attacks in a series of press releases and blog posts that refuted claims and highlighted support from bishops in Madagascar and Guinea. Several U.S. prelates also voiced their support, but the statement from the bishops' conference represented the first unified defense. The conference said CRS has never endorsed abortion in its policies or training programs, and assured that the agency takes care in vetting partnerships to avoid possible conflict with church positions.

"Based on thorough investigations into the concerns, we wish to assure the Catholic faithful that CRS fully and faithfully adheres to Church teaching in fulfilling its mission of mercy," the bishops said, at the same time urging Catholics to continue supporting the agency that has served more than 100 million people in 91 countries in the past year.

The statement continued: "We want to make it clear that those making these public critiques, albeit, we hope, in good faith, do not speak for the Catholic Church and we advise the Catholic faithful to exercise caution and consult the CRS website for clarification before endorsing or giving credence to the groups' critiques.

"? The U.S. Catholic bishops stand firmly behind CRS in its commitment to promote and defend human dignity and the sacredness of every human life from the moment of conception until natural death, and at every moment in between."

A month before the conference's statement, Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., took to his own blog to respond to accusations against Catholic Relief Services.

Lynch, CRS chairman from 2001-2007, criticized those bringing forth the attacks for not revealing the sources of their information. He also conjectured that the flurry of accusations, which he did not experience in his time as chairman, originated for purposes of financial gain.

"From time to time, I suspect when these organizations need money, they try to stir up a hornet's nest or storm by attacking a Catholic organization, usually falsely accusing them of being anti-life, pro-

contraception, either pro or soft on abortion, etc., etc., etc.," he wrote. "It's simply a money raising scheme with little regard for the human lives which they allege they seek to protect ? well maybe it is only pre-born human life in which they are interested."

The bishop also challenged the groups on their predominantly pro-life platforms.

"I am convinced that many so called Pro-Life groups are not really pro-life but merely anti-abortion. ? Many priests grow weary of continual calls to action for legislative support for abortion and contraception related issues but nothing for immigration reform, food aid, and capital punishment.

"And, this is a big one, priests don't like unfair attacks on things they highly value and esteem, like the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services," Lynch said.

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