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Catholic Relief Services plans 'strategic rethink' after Egyptian uprising

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Feb. 14, 2011

Young people wave flags atop an army vehicle at Tahrir Square in Cairo Feb. 12, a day after the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. (CNS photo/Dylan Martinez, Reuters)

The 17-day popular uprising in Egypt, which saw hundreds of thousands demonstrate in cities across the country, has prompted a "strategic rethink" for Catholic Relief Services operations across the region, said Mark Schnellbaecher, the agency?s regional director for Europe and the Middle East.

Speaking to *NCR* by phone from the CRS office in Beirut just hours after the news of Hosni Mubarak?s resignation as president was made public, Schnellbaecher said he has already scheduled a meeting with his Middle East colleagues, members of the agency?s Baltimore office, and some Arab commentators to discuss, among other things, prospects for new programming and the agency?s public posture in the region.

Catholic Relief Services, which is the aid agency of the U.S. church, works with over 80,000 people in Egypt and runs economic development and social service programs there, according to their Web site.

Convinced the winds of democratic change blowing through Cairo?s Tahrir Square cannot be contained, Schnellbaecher believes the uprisings in Egypt as well as Tunisia, although triggered by high unemployment and rising food prices, were ultimately conflicts between tyranny and democracy.

?What is happening in Egypt is a reassertion of Arab pride,? said Schnellbaecher. ?Because that is what is going on here, I don?t think we have seen the end of it.?

Schnellbaecher pointed to recent, pre-emptive actions of other Arab leaders in the region -- the decision of Jordan?s King Abdullah to sack his Cabinet two weeks ago, and the Syrian regime?s opening up access to Youtube and Facebook -- as indicators that Egypt?s rebellion ?has legs.?

Exactly how that rebellion will affect CRS activities in the Middle East remains, as yet, an unknown. The regional office of the American church?s humanitarian agency, which was established in Egypt in 1954 -- two years after the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy -- is involved in assisting Iraqi and Sudanese refugees, people afflicted with HIV and AIDS, and young girls who are victims of human trafficking.

For the past seven years, CRS has also invested in youth development programs throughout the Middle East.

According to Schnellbaecher, conditions for creating these programs have been far from optimal.

?Egypt has been a military state for the past 50 odd years, so we?ve been very constrained in what sort of programming we could do,? said Schnellbaecher. ?Essentially the government did not want us getting involved in anything the regime felt would get close to politics, things like community organizing, community mobilization.?

Schnellbaecher, who has been CRS? regional director since 2003, acknowledged the Mubarak regime had not arrested any of his staff during his watch, but said decades of political repression and intimidation had engendered a climate of self-censorship, especially among the agency?s Egyptian partner organizations.

That self-censorship has ?been very effective in determining what boundaries people were willing or not willing to push,? he said.

For example, organizing youth to pick up trash in the neighborhood was considered permissible but ?pushing the limits on that sort of thing, like asking ?Why can?t the government pick up the garbage?? that is when things get tricky.?

Schnellbaecher hopes such constraints will now be removed, or at least reduced. The strategy meeting, scheduled for March, will include a look at the new possibilities for projects in Egypt and the best approaches for presenting them in an uncertain political atmosphere.

That presentation process, which will take shape as Egypt?s new political order forms, is somewhat complicated by CRS? status as an American organization, Schnellbaecher said.

Since the U.S.-lead invasion of Iraq, Schnellbaecher has found it more beneficial to emphasize the agency?s Catholic identity over its American heritage.

Said Schnellbaecher: ?I know people may find that a little odd because of certain assumptions about Muslims . . . [but] these are deeply conservative and religious societies. Muslims actually get why someone like me would be doing this kind of work. It makes sense to them. Whereas the American thing, since Iraq, is the one that tends to be more the topic of conversation.?

Disappointment with the Obama administration?s ambivalent response to the popular uprising along with the Mubarak regime?s claim that the protests in Tahrir Square were fueled by foreign provocateurs have exacerbated Egyptian suspicion of the ?American thing,? Schnellbaecher said.

Like many observers, Schnellbaecher is cautiously optimistic about what lies ahead for the Egyptian people.

?They have accomplished a tremendous amount in the past there weeks,? he said. ?Does this mean it?s an onward and upward march to democracy? No. There are going to be a lot of detours and bumps along the road, but I think it is obvious to anybody watching: It?s a great and necessary first step.?

[Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is a freelance writer from Worcester, Mass. and member of the Sts. Francis and Therese Catholic Worker community there.]

NCR contributor Claire Schaeffer-Duffy has been conducting interviews with people connected to the unrest in Egypt this week. For her interviews, see:

- **Egyptian uprising 'far beyond what people expected'** [1], a conversation with Egyptian expert John Esposito
- **In Egypt, most powerful example of 'people power' in history** [2], a conversation with Gene Sharp, a renowned scholar of nonviolent struggle
- **Violence on Cairo streets, Egyptian demonstrators say 'will not be silenced'** [3], a conversation with says Philip Rizk, an Egyptian filmmaker and activist
- **Egyptian protester: 'Since we were born, everything had paused'** [4], a conversation with Moroug Badawy, a 24-year old Egyptian graduate student
- **Gazan activist: We need democracy and stability in Egypt** [5], a conversation with Husam el Nounou, a human rights activist living in Gaza
- **In Israel, Egypt's unrest raises questions** [6], a conversation with Adam Keller, a founding member of the Israeli peace organization Gush Shalom
- **Israeli: Mubarak should have cooperated** [7], a conversation with Ovadia Keidar, an Egyptian-born Israeli Jew
- **Democratic Egypt 'best thing possible' for US policy** [8], a conversation with Stephen Zunes, a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco
- **From Egypt: Jubilation in the streets** [9], a second conversation with Moroug Badawy

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