

Aid network wants probe into CIA's vaccination program in Pakistan

BANGALORE, India - A network of charities working in Pakistan wants the U.S. government to investigate a short-lived CIA-run vaccination clinic allegedly used for counterterrorism and intelligence-gathering purposes.

The Pakistan Humanitarian Forum, a coalition of 40 charities including the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services, said it was "gravely concerned by reports that the CIA organized a fake vaccination program in Abbottabad," the Pakistani city where Osama bin Laden was killed in May.

The intelligence-gathering effort, uncovered by the London-based Guardian newspaper, was devised in an attempt to verify that bin Laden was living in the city in northeast Pakistan. Its purpose was to collect DNA samples from members of bin Laden's family who obtained free services at the clinic, but the effort was unsuccessful, the newspaper reported.

The CIA operation jeopardized the charities' work and damages the credibility of individual aid workers, a July 27 statement from the forum said.

"The statement from the PHF expresses our outrage at the alleged ruse perpetrated by the CIA to conduct a vaccination campaign in Abbottabad in order to obtain DNA from members of Osama bin Laden's family," Jack Byrne, Catholic Relief Services' country representative in Pakistan, told Catholic News Service Aug. 9.

CRS currently chairs the human rights forum.

"The statement from the PHF is pretty self-explanatory," Byrne said. "We wanted to

go on record as standing against this practice.”

The CIA has declined comment on the vaccination program.

Bin Laden was shot dead May 2 in an American covert military operation in the compound where he had been living in secret with three wives and more than a dozen children.

The alleged vaccination plot by the CIA, the forum’s statement explained, “could also endanger thousands of international and Pakistani aid workers trying to deliver assistance in a difficult environment (because locals could) question the true motivation of aid workers in Pakistan where vaccination schemes remain key to curtailing diseases.”

“Such irresponsible actions would damage our members’ hard-earned reputations for integrity, and potentially taint the trust we require to effectively carry on,” the forum said.

The alleged action suggested “both willful arrogance and ignorance, which will have a detrimental effect on our work to help millions of vulnerable Pakistanis,” the statement continued.

“Any time military or political objectives are carried out under the guise of legitimate humanitarian work, actual humanitarian assistance to the people of Pakistan suffers. International aid organizations strive for impartiality so they can carry out their work unimpeded. If we, the members of the PHF, do not retain that perception of integrity, both our efforts and the safety of our staff will be compromised,” the statement said.

The forum also urged the U.S. government “to investigate these serious allegations against the CIA and to take firm action in order to prevent any abuse of

humanitarian assistance.”

Soon after the Guardian’s report was published, the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders deplored the misuse of the vaccination campaign as “a dangerous abuse of medical care.”

“Whether true or not, the mere suggestion that the provision of medical care was carried out under false pretense damages public perception of the true purpose of medical action,” said Dr. Unni Karunakara, the organization’s international president.

“With all populations in crisis, it is challenging enough for health agencies and humanitarian aid workers to gain access to, and the trust of, communities, especially populations already skeptical of the motives of any outside assistance,” he said.

The full text of the Pakistan Humanitarian Forum statement is available online at <http://pakhumanitarianforum.org/press-releases>.