

Baltimore-based CRS announces it is resuming its food program in Western Darfur

Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services has announced that it is resuming operations in Western Darfur more than two months after evacuating its staff.

A statement on the CRS website March 28 said the agency was working with local government officials to ensure food distribution began immediately, and it expressed appreciation “for support.”

Two days earlier, the agency announced that the 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.

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.” A CRS spokeswoman discounted rumors that the agency had been distributing Bibles in the area.

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 had said if it had closed its food program, more than 400,000 people would have been without food aid.

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.

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.