

Bishop Madden among religious leaders targeting Senate to preserve foreign aid

WASHINGTON - With the Senate preparing to take up the appropriations bill for foreign aid, Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden called to mind some of his more vivid encounters with recipients of such assistance and how it affected their lives.

Bishop Madden, vice chairman of the board of directors of Catholic Relief Services, spoke to reporters on Capitol Hill Nov. 2, as he and other religious leaders prepared to meet with senators, hoping to persuade them not to cut the kind of foreign assistance that keeps people in fragile circumstances alive.

While working in the Middle East for the Pontifical Mission for Palestine and the Catholic Near East Welfare Association from the mid-1990s through 2005, Bishop Madden explained, part of his responsibilities included overseeing part of the church's response to emergency situations.

"With the closure of the Gaza Strip (Israel built a barrier across the area between 1994 and 1996), I can see the faces of the people who received food. CRS through USAID was able to bring food into this area," Bishop Madden told Catholic News Service. "I can see the faces of people who had no food, in addition to being bombed regularly," as Israel and Palestinian forces battled over the territory.

Such personal encounters with the people who are helped by U.S. foreign aid would provide background for his lobbying efforts on the Hill, Bishop Madden said.

The Senate was to begin consideration Nov. 3 of the appropriations bill that includes the budget for State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations. The bill was scheduled for a final vote the following week.

Bishop Madden and the other religious leaders were advocating for the full Senate to adopt the version of the bill approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee,

which largely preserved funding for anti-poverty programs at the level approved in the 2011 budget. That level of funding included an 8 percent cut from the 2010 budget.

The Rev. David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, said at the press briefing that the funding at issue is the kind that supports the most basic aid for poor people abroad. He told of visiting an area of northern Bangladesh earlier this year where he had lived 35 years earlier.

“Things were visibly better,” he said. Roads, housing, health, the quality and variety of food, and particularly the status of women were much improved, though poverty continues to be pervasive there, he said. While some of the improvement is attributable to improvements in Bangladesh in general, the level of international assistance in the area over the last generation was clearly partly responsible, Rev. Beckmann said.

Bishop Madden noted that although the public perception is that the United States spends 20-25 percent of its budget on foreign aid, the fact is that the level is less than 1 percent.

Programs such as those providing anti-retroviral drugs to people with HIV/AIDS, emergency refugee and migration assistance, debt restructuring, child survival and maternal health, and international disaster assistance are among those facing steep cuts under the appropriation proposal from the House.