

Priest reports anti-Christian bias in Pakistan aid distribution

VATICAN CITY - Christians and other minorities affected by severe flooding in Pakistan are being discriminated against in government-run rescue and aid programs, said the director of pontifical missionary societies in Pakistan.

Father Mario Rodrigues, the Lahore-based director of the mission awareness and funding agencies, said, "While Caritas and the pontifical mission societies are working on providing humanitarian relief to displaced persons without discrimination of origin, race or religion, in other areas, the Christian refugees, even in the midst of this tragedy, are being treated as second-class citizens."

"They often receive little assistance or are excluded altogether," the priest told Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Fides said Aug. 20 that the priest specifically identified government aid programs as those engaged in discriminatory practices.

Muslims make up about 97 percent of Pakistan's population.

The severe flooding that began in Pakistan in late July has left at least 4 million Pakistanis homeless and without food or clean drinking water.

Aid is coming "slowly and with difficulty," Father Rodrigues said.

There is an ongoing "war among the poor" to receive the limited amount of aid available, he said.

As far as the government distribution goes, he said, "refugees belonging to religious minorities are the most neglected, excluded, discriminated against."

"Our priests, volunteers and lay leaders in the provinces of Punjab, Sind and Baluchistan are visiting the affected areas, collecting hundreds of displaced Christians who had been left to themselves, bringing them to camps run by Caritas and other NGOs of Christian inspiration in order to guarantee them the minimum

assistance they need," he said.

The severe flooding will have an impact on Pakistan for a long time to come, he said.

"This tragedy will mark the initiation of a dark period in which, given the destruction of vast tracts of farmland and the death of livestock, there will be a serious food security crisis due to the lack of food and rising prices of primary goods," Father Rodrigues said.