

Southern African bishops buy food, medicine for suffering Zimbabweans

CAPE TOWN, South Africa - The Catholic bishops of Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland have used diocesan funds to buy food and medicine for Zimbabweans and urged Catholics in their countries to help provide immediate relief to their suffering neighbors.

The contributions will be distributed through the Caritas Internationalis aid network in Zimbabwe, the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference said in a Jan. 28 statement from Pretoria, South Africa.

In the statement, Archbishop Buti Tlhagale of Johannesburg, president of the conference, called on "all parishes and communities in the conference territory to join their bishops in making a financial contribution so that food and medicine can be bought."

"Zimbabwe has moved from a crisis to a disaster to passive genocide," Archbishop Tlhagale said. "We cannot stand by without offering practical and immediate help. This is our Christian duty."

A mid-January report from Physicians for Human Rights said Zimbabwe's health care system, once a model for southern Africa, has collapsed because of the government's egregious, systematic human rights violations.

The bishops said Feb. 15 will be Solidarity Sunday in the region, when a collection for Zimbabwe will be taken up in all churches and communities. Food, clothing and medicine will be collected and sent to the conference's headquarters in Pretoria, and special prayers will be said for those suffering in Zimbabwe.

"I am sure that the solidarity that we feel for Zimbabwe will compel us to extraordinary generosity - lives are at stake," Archbishop Tlhagale said.

The World Health Organization said Jan. 28 that a cholera epidemic in Zimbabwe had killed more than 3,000 people since August, and nearly 60,000 people in southern Africa - mainly in Zimbabwe - had contracted the disease.

Zimbabwe's economy is in ruins with runaway inflation. Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, have been deadlocked in talks to form a power-sharing government.