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Supporters of the U.S. Agency for International Development, known as USAID, gather near the U.S. Capitol Feb. 5, to rail against the Trump administration's attempt to dismantle the humanitarian agency. However, the Congressional Research Service raised legal questions Feb. 3 about whether the agency, which helps with job training, education, clean water projects and other humanitarian assistance in more than 100 countries can be dismantled without congressional approval. (NCR/Rhina Guidos)



by Rhina Guidos

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Catholic sisters say they won't abandon the hungry, sick and dying whose numbers will increase because of the Trump administration's February decision to cut global humanitarian aid through the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"We knew we'd reach this stage," said Sr. Eneless Chimbali, a member of the Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Blantyre, Malawi, and senior program officer for the All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister.

She participated in the March 13 online panel "Human Costs of Abandoning U.S. Help Around the World: The Experience of Catholic Sisters and Catholic Relief Services," organized by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University.

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Chimbali said sisters in Africa had discussed in 2015 what would happen if funding suddenly stopped for programs that help them feed those suffering hunger, those living with HIV/AIDS, and those who need education.

They recently had to face that reality after the Jan. 20 inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump, who has allowed billionaire friend Elon Musk to gut government programs and the federal workforce. Musk said in an early February tweet that he had spent the weekend "feeding USAID into the wood chipper." According to the Associated Press, the Trump administration said in late February it was cutting $60 billion in U.S. humanitarian aid and over 90% of USAID's foreign aid contracts.

Among the cuts were funds that help women religious and Catholic humanitarian organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services, or CRS, carry out their mission.

That money was needed to save lives, to protect the vulnerable — not to waste, said Chimbali.



A Catholic Relief Services worker is helping a young woman at a food distribution area in Marojela village, located in the Marolinta commune in southern Madagascar's Beloha District. On this day, 416 people from six villages received food. Over the past several years, the southern region of Madagascar has been affected by recurring droughts. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Relief Services/Jim Stipe)

She was joined on the panel by Sr. Florence Muia, of the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Nairobi, Bill O'Keefe, CRS's executive vice president for mission and mobilization and advocacy, and Maryknoll Sr. Dee Smith, whose ministry in Guatemala includes HIV and AIDS education, prevention and treatment efforts.

The lack of funding for programs, along with the increased number of deportees Guatemala is expecting from the U.S., "will put more pressure here," and "it will get worse," Smith said.

The New York Times obtained a memo from the acting assistant administrator for global health at USAID, with the publication reporting on some possible health consequences around the world from the withdrawal of aid. That included "up to 18 million additional cases of malaria per year … 200,000 children paralyzed with polio annually, and hundreds of millions of infections; one million children not treated for severe acute malnutrition, which is often fatal, each year" and "more than 28,000 new cases of such infectious diseases as Ebola and Marburg every year."

Muia, founder of Upendo Village, a facility in Kenya that helps people living with HIV in low-income communities, said one of the biggest concerns is "the loss of the gains we have made" in treatment of AIDS. In Kenya, about 1.4 million live with HIV/AIDS, she said.

"As I pronounce the number, it sends chills on my body because without the availability of the antiretroviral medications, which are life-saving, it threatens the lives of all these people," she said.

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Without funding to diagnose those with HIV/AIDS, transmissions will skyrocket. Labs already have closed because there is no money to pay workers, and as funding for education dries up, the end of such prevention efforts that helped stop the disease HIV and AIDS will mean exponential spread, Muia said.

"We are also going to see probably a lot of deaths," she said. "Unless the decision is reversed, we are likely to lose our fight and continue to lose more lives."

Chimbali said Catholics seeking to help in any way can take the opportunity that Lent offers, sacrifice and save, and send that money to organizations such as Catholic Relief Services.

"People of goodwill, look at these vulnerable people," she said. "I know besides the government, there are people of goodwill who might be even listening. Whatever you can save… [send money] to save a child of God. … The situation is not very good, but we need to give people hope. We can't afford to lose hope. This is a jubilee year, focusing on hope. We are holding on to hope. Christ is our hope."

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CRS's O'Keefe said that while it's a great idea to support organizations, "only governments can mobilize the kinds of resources at the scale needed to address these situations." And while personal donations help a great deal, this is a moment to appeal to a greater power, too, he said.

"I think prayer, praying for a country whose hearts have hardened, that [hearts] might be softened," he said. "And second, I really do encourage people to advocate. These cuts are made on a premise that the American people don't care. I think we, as the American people, have to show them that we do."

His organization's website has a form online that Catholics can fill out electronically. It is automatically sent via email to lawmakers to let them know church members care about foreign aid and want it back.

"We're trying to flood every office of Congress, Republicans and Democrats, so that they really understand how we, as Catholics, consider caring for our brothers and sisters around the world, have a critical moral responsibility," O'Keefe said.

"We can definitely turn the tide on this, but it's going to take hard work and action."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.