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Bracing for War's Ravages

Humanitarian groups mobilize for a crisis in Iraq

By Stephen G. Greene

Charities are gearing up to cope with a significant -- potentially catastrophic -- humanitarian crisis in and around Iraq, and have begun raising the hundreds of millions of dollars they predict that effort will require.

Regardless of the eventual number of Iraqis displaced by the war, aid groups say they will have plenty of work to do in helping Iraqis rebuild their country. Two previous wars involving Iraq and more than a decade of international sanctions have contributed to a host of problems, from high rates of infant mortality and childhood diseases to crumbling schools and hospitals. And relief workers note that hundreds of thousands of Iraqis still live in camps both inside and outside Iraq, to which they fled during previous emergencies.

But even as relief and development charities mobilized resources, their concern was heightened by anxiety that the Bush administration may be envisioning a more limited role for U.N. agencies, and indeed for nongovernmental organizations, than has been the case in other recent humanitarian emergencies in places like Afghanistan and the Balkans.

"We're concerned that the people with a lot of expertise and experience seem to be an afterthought, seem to be overlooked," said Mary E. McClymont, president of InterAction, a coalition of more than 160 organizations that operate overseas. "There hasn't been enough thought or consideration given to the critical role the U.N. agencies and NGO's play in humanitarian assistance and reconstruction."

The Bush administration, for its part, contends that it has consulted extensively with aid groups in planning its strategy in Iraq -- citing, among other things, its commitment to leave intact, insofar as possible, the electricity grid, waterworks, and other infrastructure on which public health depends. Government officials say they hope to turn over the humanitarian work to private groups as soon as possible, and also point to the military's efforts to open a secure route for transporting humanitarian aid.

Aside from concerns about how effectively they will be able to aid war-torn Iraq, some aid groups also worry that the Iraq crisis will distract public attention and divert resources from other important parts of the world, at a time when they are already involved with other major humanitarian projects, including combating famine in southern Africa and the HIV/AIDS pandemic across much of that continent, as well as working to rebuild Afghanistan. "It's important for people to remember there is great need in many parts of the world," said Alina Labrada, a spokeswoman for CARE USA. "There's a certain concern that funds will be diverted, and that's very worrying."

'A Dismal Job'

Some nonprofit officials say the Bush administration has been little help as they have tried to plan for a potentially massive humanitarian disaster in and around Iraq. They say federal officials have withheld both information and money, making it difficult and complicated for aid groups to get the U.S. government's permission to operate inside Iraq.

"There has been a dismal job in sharing meaningful information so that agencies can prepare," said Ms. McClymont, and "a great lack of funding during the preparation phase, so that humanitarians could have the supplies and equipment in place to respond."

The administration says it has responded to criticism by streamlining its process of granting licenses to American groups wishing to work in the region. But some organizations in the meantime are linking up with non-United States charities that operate inside Iraq. CARE USA, for example, works through CARE Australia, while Relief International does its work in northern Iraq through a Swedish charity called Qandil.

Still, said Nathaniel Raymond, a spokesman for Oxfam America: "If a massive humanitarian disaster beyond the current situation occurs, that lack of preparedness will show."

Oxfam is among the charities that lost little time in seeking support for their work in the region. The charity raised more than \$600,000 in the first week after war broke out. About \$400,000 came from supporters of MoveOn, which promotes grass-roots activism around a number of causes, in response to an e-mail appeal. Some 1,800 visitors to Oxfam's own Web site donated an additional \$147,000 for the charity's work in Iraq. And donations arrived at an average rate of about 10 an hour via its toll-free telephone line throughout the weekend.

"That money will go directly to our emergency response in Iraq, and will allow us to continue our tradition of not diverting money from other programs during a crisis like the Iraq conflict," Mr. Raymond said. The charity last week was preparing to send an assessment team into the southern city of Basra to evaluate what help it might need, while it also readied camps in Syria and Jordan for refugees, who had not begun arriving in significant numbers.

Press Coverage

Because most news coverage of Iraq has been focused on the military action, many charities are trying to educate both their own donors and the general public about the humanitarian situation in that country. A lot of groups are using their Web sites to describe their activities in and around Iraq and offer donors a way to support them. But some groups said they were delaying more-aggressive fund raising until the nature and scope of the humanitarian crisis became clearer.

"We've been quite discreet," noted Kevin P. Whorton, director of direct-response fund raising at Catholic Relief Services. "You have to know what you're going to do programmatically before you approach the donors."

Early in this crisis, too, he added, some Americans may be in no mood to help even Iraqi civilians, as military action dominates the news. But video footage of the plight of needy civilians is likely to alter that sentiment. "It isn't until you see a lot of people in refugee camps that many people's sympathies begin to go from Column A to Column B," he said.

Full-page ads by the U.S. Fund for Unicef that ran in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* the Sunday after the war started said that, while civilians, diplomats, and reporters have left Iraq, "Unicef is staying." The ads were intended partly to reassure potential donors that the relief organization would continue working in Iraq, said Diane M. Whitty, senior vice president for marketing and development. But the ads were also an early step in what is expected to be a long campaign to raise some \$180-million for the organization's work in Iraq, she said.

"One of the great things about Americans is that their first response in these emergencies is, 'What's happening to the kids?'" Ms. Whitty said. "The reality is that Iraq already has dismal child-mortality rates, one in four children are malnourished, and one in eight die before their fifth birthday. And more children die in war than soldiers do."

The ads helped generate lots of phone calls from donors, who contributed \$13,000 the day after they ran. And some foundations have also called to request grant proposals, Ms. Whitty said.

Also over the first weekend after war broke out, the International Rescue Committee sent 135,000 letters to donors, hoping to duplicate the success of a similar mailing they did in January, which raised about \$250,000. The charity has five teams of workers in the region, including experts on primary health care, water, and sanitation.

Joint Appeals

Some organizations are collaborating on joint appeals, including eight charities that have combined forces to raise \$1-million for basic medical supplies to help children in Iraq. It was "an uphill struggle" at first to raise money for the "All Our Children" campaign, which began in January, said Kevin King, material resources manager at the Mennonite Central Committee, in Akron, Pa. But the response has picked up considerably since the outbreak of hostilities, he said.

In addition to his organization, which last year supported programs in 57 countries, including Iraq, the other campaign members are Church World Service, Jubilee Partners, Lutheran World Relief, the National Council of Churches U.S.A., Oxfam America, Sojourners, and Stop Hunger Now.

Combining forces not only allows the charities to attract greater attention to their efforts but also helps ease the burden on the local groups in Iraq that will be expected to account for whatever supplies they receive. Those groups can fill out a single application and just one progress report, for example, rather than applying and reporting separately to all eight charities.

"Many of these [Iraqi] groups can get overrun by a flurry of well-meaning nongovernmental organizations, so any collaboration on this side can really help," Mr. King said.

Safety of Aid Workers

Security is a major concern for aid workers in Iraq, as it has been in previous complex humanitarian emergencies. Some charities acknowledge that the military needs to be involved in the early stages of the relief effort, in parts of the country still too dangerous for charities to operate in freely. But many of them hope that the military phases out its own role in such operations as soon as possible.

"It's inevitable that the military will be doing it" initially, said Peter Medway, senior program manager at Relief International, in Los Angeles. "If the choice is between people getting water or not getting water, based on some high principle, that's an easy decision." Nevertheless, he added, prolonged military delivery of humanitarian aid could jeopardize the work of private organizations.

"Humanitarian aid needs to be run by humanitarians, not by the occupying force," said Mr. King, of the Mennonite Central Committee. It blurs the line between military and humanitarian operations, he said, "when you're dropping bombs with one hand and butter with the other."

Preserving Independence

Most aid groups strenuously protect their independence from the government to preserve their image as neutral organizations with solely humanitarian purposes. To that end, some organizations have long declined to accept money from the U.S. Agency for International Development, so they can maintain that independence and comment freely about government policies with which they may disagree.

Many humanitarian-aid organizations had opposed military action in Iraq, at least until diplomatic channels had been exhausted and the U.N. Security Council had passed another resolution that explicitly called for troops to enforce their earlier resolutions.

Now that war has come, however, some groups are rethinking their positions. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which has expressed strong opposition to the war in Iraq, had instructed its overseas relief and development arm, Catholic Relief Services, not to accept government grants for its work in that region. But the bishops now are reconsidering that decision, said Lillian Messih, regional representative for North Africa and the Middle East at Catholic Relief Services.

Other kinds of charities are also expressing concerns about the effect of military action in Iraq. Friends of the Earth, for example, points to environmental destruction caused by the Gulf War that has lingered for a decade, and fears that the current war might cause similar damage to Iraq's air, water, and people's health from burning oil wells or the explosion of munitions, said its president, Brent Blackwelder. But he also has other worries related to government expenditures.

President Bush has requested almost \$75-billion to underwrite costs of the war through September, Mr. Blackwelder noted, adding that that amount represents a decade of spending for the Environmental Protection Agency.

"If you add the costs of the war to the federal budget deficit, I'd predict that for all areas of nonprofit concern -- whether education, health care, housing, environmental enforcement, or the cleanup of Superfund toxic dump sites -- all of these will be scrambling for a much-reduced pot of money," he said.

Private Donations

Many groups that do accept government grants and contracts are relying on money they raise privately to tide them over until they can secure funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"We'll have enough money in the next few weeks to start some small programs, but we'll also work hard to leverage USAID grants," said Mr. Medway, of International Relief.

Also generating lots of comment among aid charities is the Bush administration's apparent decision to seek to minimize the role of U.N. agencies in rebuilding Iraq after the war, and to instead hire private American companies to do much of the work. While aid officials say that private companies are well equipped to handle jobs like rebuilding roads, operating airports and seaports, and upgrading water systems, they argue that nonprofit groups have crucial expertise in overhauling education and health systems and promoting civil society.

"It's going to be critical for the U.N. to play a very prominent role in both the humanitarian response and in the post-conflict reconstruction," said Ms. McClymont, of InterAction. "We have said from the beginning that we want to see a handoff as soon as possible to the U.N. for the coordination of humanitarian assistance. We must internationalize the response, and we must ensure that all the expertise and experience of the U.N. and the international community is brought to bear on the humanitarian response."

At the same time, charities say, they must focus on the worldwide picture, too.

Said Mr. Whorton, of Catholic Relief Services about the crisis in Iraq: "I hate to say it's a blip, but we can't let it change our overall focus," which places a priority on helping to combat AIDS in Africa.

"We have to continue to sustain all our programs," Mr. Whorton said. "If we lurched from crisis to crisis, I'm afraid we wouldn't get much done."

Grant Williams contributed to this article.

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