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At candlelight vigil, religious leaders urge world not to forget Sudan

BY MOIRA E. MCLAUGHLIN

Catholic Standard

At an interfaith candlelight vigil Oct. 13 in downtown Washington, participants were urged not to forget the suffering people of Sudan.

"History has shown us what happens when the world stands idly by," said Ken Hackett, the president of Catholic Relief Services, which sponsored the vigil. "It's not too late to take action."

Hackett recalled the atrocities of Rwanda and Kosovo and urged the crowd to spread the news of Sudan to their families and to their congressional representatives. About 70 people attended the vigil, which was held at Freedom Plaza. The diverse crowd of demonstrators - which included people of different religions, races and ages - prayed for an end to the suffering in Sudan.

'OVERCOME HATE'

More than 1.4 million Sudanese from the region of Darfur are homeless, and at least 50,000 are dead due to militia attacks. The Sudanese government-backed militia known as the Janjaweed has stormed villages, killing men, raping women, and burning and looting communities. An estimated 200,000 refugees have fled from Sudan to camps on the Chadian border, and according to the World Health Organization, about 10,000 of the refugees are dying every month. The fighting is a result of conflict between African rebels and the Arab government.

At the Washington rally, Jewish and Muslim speakers were joined by Catholic, Lutheran and Ethiopian Orthodox Church representatives. A gospel choir from St. Martin's Parish in Washington sang during the vigil.

Imam Yahya Hendi, the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University, appealed to the participants to join together regardless of religion. "Give voice to the voiceless," he said. "Cry, be a voice of love...overcome the voice of hate."

Robert Holum, the pastor at Lutheran Place Memorial in Washington, ended his talk saying, "God bless the people of Sudan. God bless the people of Iraq. May God awaken the sleeping nation, the United States."

'OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS'

Emilia Jones, a Nigerian now living in the United States, attended the vigil. She said she planned to take extra programs with her back to her office, where she is an attorney, in hopes of spreading the word about the crisis in Sudan. "The situation in Sudan needs to be handled immediately," she said. "It affects all of us. They are our sisters and brothers. We can't live in a cocoon."

The Catholic bishops of the United States founded Catholic Relief Services in 1943 to assist the poor and disadvantaged. They operate in five continents and 94 countries and have pledged \$6 million to relief efforts in Sudan and Chad. CRS has worked in Sudan since 1972 and is providing water sanitation, shelter, education and psychosocial support for the refugees in Darfur. They are also assisting in management of three refugee camps along the Chadian border.

The relief agency sponsored a similar candlelight vigil Sept. 21 in Baltimore at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, led by Cardinal William Keeler. CRS is headquartered in Baltimore.

CRS has identified three major threats to the refugees: disease, food shortage and an inadequate amount of support. Hackett visited Sudan in August. The relief organization estimates that one-third of Darfur's population of 6 million people will need emergency aid by the end of the year.

To support CRS relief efforts in Sudan, call 1-877-HELP-CRS or visit www.catholicrelief.org.

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