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Aid to help Pakistan back on its feet: Caritas Internationalis Sec-Gen

By Darren Boon

SINGAPORE – Helping the people of flood-hit Pakistan to attain sustainable livelihoods is the aim of Caritas Internationalis' rehabilitation plans in the country, said the organisation's Secretary General Doctor Lesley Anne-Knight (photo).

The body "doesn't want to be in there distributing food for years". Instead, "we need to get people standing on their own two feet and to be able to provide for themselves," she told CatholicNews in a recent interview.

The flooding in Pakistan, which began in late July, has resulted in 1,500 people losing their lives and affecting up to 20 million people along with the destruction of three million hectares of crops, according to the United Nations estimates.

The death toll is not indicative of the severity of the situation, said Doctor Knight. Many communities have totally lost whatever little they had, land for crop production has been destroyed for years to come, houses are wrecked and a large population has been displaced.

Describing the flood as "overwhelming" and "one of the worst we had in Pakistan", Doctor Knight said Caritas Internationalis would commit between US\$20 million and US\$30 million in the next six to twelve months in aid of the disaster victims.

However she estimated that it would take at least 10 years for the country to recover from the ordeal.

Caritas Internationalis' rehabilitation plans for the affected victims include providing seeds, tools and agriculture implements to help people move back towards food production. Small funding or micro-credit schemes would help people set up small businesses, while cash-for-work provides short term employment opportunities in home production.

Materials will be provided for affected victims to rebuild their homes.

But more importantly, Doctor Knight said, Caritas hopes to "raise awareness of the vulnerability of people to



ongoing flooding and for them to be able to protect themselves from against further disasters".

She was speaking to CatholicNews on Aug 20 on the sidelines of the launch of Caritas Humanitarian Aid & Relief Initiatives Singapore (CHARIS), the Singapore's archdiocese's coordinating body in response to overseas disaster efforts and humanitarian needs.

Doctor Knight said aid workers face huge challenges working in a "volatile and insecure" country to access affected communities. "Our

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own aid workers are subject to kidnapping, threats or simply not being able to access areas because they are controlled by the Taliban or where the Taliban make it too insecure to work," she said.

She said: "We're well respected in Pakistan as Caritas particularly. We work very closely with United Nations bodies as well. We are known and highly respected for impartiality and that we do not discriminate against anybody because of their religion."

"And in humanitarian situations more than any other times, we must demonstrate that we are impartial in anything we do. It doesn't mean that it is without challenges. We know that there's persecution of Christians in these areas, and we have be conscious of that. But we also have to move beyond it. Our actions will speak for themselves," she said.

She added: "We go out to help people not because they're Catholic, but because we're Catholic and that is really important." □

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