

# Christian Relief Agencies Brace for Vast Humanitarian Needs in Iraq

Christian relief agencies are preparing for a massive humanitarian response should the United States attack Iraq.

Some leaders of these agencies are also concerned that the months of intense media focus on the march to war has deflected attention away from other areas of the world desperately needing humanitarian assistance. If war begins, that focus will become more intense.

As many as 10 million people in Iraq will need food if the United States launches a war. Half of that number will be nursing mothers and children younger than 5 years old, according to an action alert released in February by Lutheran World Relief, based in Baltimore, Md. The agency estimates that 1.5 million Iraqis could seek refuge in neighboring countries.

Although the Middle East Council of Churches continues to push for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, its general secretary, the Rev. Riad JarJour, said it would be “irresponsible not to prepare for the humanitarian disaster war will bring,” according to a news release from the council.

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has 46 workers in the Middle East; 40 are North Americans, including children, and six are local staff, according to an e-mail from Director of Communications Mark Beach.

A worker in Iraq monitors the distribution of the MCC’s emergency aid, including medicines, food and school supplies. That worker is also assisting other staffers as they focus “on placing emergency aid in the event of war with Iraq.”

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Workers will remain in the field, but the MCC has “contingency plans in place in the event of escalating conflict,” Beach told EthicsDaily.com. He added that “the threat of war has put in jeopardy our ability to keep workers in the region and making those who are there more vulnerable.”

Funding-based agencies, including Baptist World Aid and Baptist World Aid Australia, could find themselves strapped for cash as they try to help the humanitarian organizations that meet the vast physical needs of everyday citizens caught in the conflict.

Baptist World Aid’s donations have fallen since Sept. 11, 2001, and the organization “constantly needs to replenish its funds as it assists those in need around the world,” Director Paul Montacute told EthicsDaily.com in an e-mail.

BWA Australia’s financial support has been holding up, according to National Director Les Fussell. The agency’s main focus for now is to advocate for a “no-war” solution in Iraq. The agency is also urging supporters to step up to the plate so the agency can channel funding for humanitarian relief efforts to Iraq.

Lutheran World Relief has received minimal donations for emergency preparations, according to an e-mail from Communications Director Jonathan Frerichs.

“We and our partners are constrained in getting ready by the apparent lack of focus on the humanitarian dimensions of this crisis,” he wrote. “Food is available for purchase in Iraq, for example, but churches prepared to act as neighborhood shelters await funds to buy it so they can build up their emergency stockpiles.”

The MCC has been suffering from budget cutbacks because of reduced overall giving that has hit many agencies. Designated giving to the MCC’s Iraq and Palestine initiatives, however, remains strong, Beach wrote.

The MCC is also one of the ecumenical partners of the All Our Children campaign, which seeks to raise \$1 million for critical health-care needs of Iraqi children.

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Longtime Southern Baptists Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter support the campaign.

And while the need for humanitarian aid won't disappear in Iraq, other areas seem to have been pushed from the media spotlight.

"We are also concerned (about) the disproportionate amount of publicity focused on this one part of the world while seemingly ignoring many other parts of the world where there is already war, famine, hunger and disease," BWA's Montacute observed.

Lutheran World Relief's Frerichs told EthicsDaily.com: "So much focus on us and our security makes it easy to forget the Great Commandment that undergirds this work: that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves."

"So much money devoted to taking life in one place makes it even harder than usual to generate support for the relatively modest amounts needed to protect and save lives in so many other places," Frerichs said. Those needs include the AIDS pandemic and the food crisis in Southern Africa and the Horn of Africa.

"At a time like this," he said, "we might well ask what are the priorities for ministry right now in God's eyes."

*[Michael Leathers](#) is a Baptist journalist in Springfield, Ill.*

For more information on how you can help these organizations, check out the following Web sites:

Baptist World Aid at [www.bwanet.org](http://www.bwanet.org)

Baptist World Aid Australia at [www.shareanopportunity.org](http://www.shareanopportunity.org)

Lutheran World Relief at [www.lwr.org](http://www.lwr.org)

All Our Children campaign at [www.allourchildren.org](http://www.allourchildren.org)

Mennonite Central Committee at [www.mcc.org](http://www.mcc.org)