

# Religious leaders lobby Congress on foreign aid

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WASHINGTON (RNS) As Congress prepares for a high-stakes battle over federal spending, religious leaders are lobbying senators to preserve foreign aid as a moral obligation.

"We're talking about lives -- great numbers of lives that are saved with minimal input on our part," said the Most Rev. Denis Madden, the Roman Catholic auxiliary bishop of Baltimore and vice chair of Catholic Relief Services, on Wednesday (Nov. 2).

Madden affirmed that poverty-focused international aid makes up just 0.6 percent of the federal budget, but that amount feeds more than 46 million people and saves 3 million lives through immunizations each year.

Sen. Christopher Coons, D-Del., hosted the closed-door conversation, which was also attended by Sens. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and Roy Blunt, R-Mo.

"Part of the discussion centered on the importance of reminding the American people that hunger and poverty around the world has a human face -- that we're not just talking about statistics, but real people," said the Rev. John McCullough, director of Church World Service, the humanitarian arm of the National Council of Churches.

The Rev. David Beckmann, president of Christian anti-hunger group Bread for the World, said the Senate faces a proposal from the House to cut foreign humanitarian programs by 20 percent, which he said would cause "14 million of the most desperate people in the world" to lose food rations.

But he saw hope in a recommendation from the Senate Appropriations Committee to leave the funding intact.

"Responding to hunger and poverty is not a partisan issue ... it is a moral issue that people of faith, across the political spectrum, agree upon," said McCullough.

Beckmann said one of the strongest voices for preserving poverty relief programs during the budget debate has been the Circle of Protection initiative, composed of "predominantly white evangelical organizations where people are, in general, very conservative."

Maj. Betty Israel, national social services secretary for the Salvation Army, noted that because anti-poverty programs make up only a sliver of federal spending, they could not be used as a "budget balancer."

Aside from tangible benefits to the world's poor, several activists noted that foreign aid also raises the international standing of the United States.

Sayyid Syeed, a national director for the Islamic Society of North America, referred to the pro-democracy Arab Spring uprisings and said, "It would be very unfortunate if we would take a step back from that world leadership at a time when it is needed the most."