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CATHOLIC PROJECT

Efforts educate, advocate

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Among the projects sponsored by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Peru is one managed by Caritas, the relief and development arm of the Catholic Church, to do advocacy work and peace-building in the Mantaro Watershed area.

Also financed by a partnership between the Italian and Peruvian governments, the project monitors health and pollution levels in the watershed, which covers a large part of the central highlands region of Peru (see separate article).

The principal source of pollution in the region is the smelting plant operated by the Doe Run mine in the town of La Oroya.

Goals

In a meeting with American journalists and CRS staff, Caritas staffers outlined some of their efforts:

- * distributing a newsletter to local residents on protecting the environment, which includes explanations of Catholic social teaching, suggestions for conflict resolution and practical steps people can take;
- * visiting six provinces in the watershed region to see how they're affected by pollution, and talking about advocacy for human rights and the environment;
- * holding workshops for locals on conflict resolution; and
- * creating a web page about the environmental crisis.

Knowledge

Awareness-raising is another key component. Through a "Revive Mantaro" program, mothers and infants are given health evaluations; provided with medicine like vitamin C, calcium and iron supplements; and given food that is prepared by the mothers in "community kitchens" organized in area towns.

Volunteers also work with schools to promote awareness of the problem among teachers, parents and children, encouraging community leaders to become "promoters" themselves.

Caritas officials said the collective efforts have met with some success: Three years ago, people in the region accepted the alarming environmental conditions as "the way things had to be."

Changes

Washington Moori of the Revive Mantaro program noted that, with 97 percent of local economic activity directly or indirectly related to the mines, "the first reaction of workers was to defend their jobs, which is understandable."

After years of work, however, Caritas staff said they see "a change in the climate of awareness that something has to be done about this. But it's still a process. The government who should support this [advocacy] often sides with the economic power; mines are the economic power and are against change."

(A poster being distributed by Caritas describes the effects of heavy metals on one's health. From mercury to sulfur dioxide, each contaminant is listed, along with the kinds of cancer it causes. On the poster, a pregnant mother, an ill-appearing father and two fighting children are shown in the shadow of a smokestack sporting an evil grin and garbage on the ground. After education, medication and personal advocacy -- cleanup efforts, reduced smokestack emissions, healthy eating and proper trash disposal -- are shown; and the same family appears smiling, in a healthy environment. The poster notes that everyone is responsible for caring for life and creation. Learn more about CRS, the overseas aid agency of American Catholics, at www.catholicrelief.org.)

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