

**Written Testimony by Bishop A. Elias Zaidan, Chairman,  
Committee on International Justice and Peace  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to the  
House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs  
May 2024**

On behalf of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I thank the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs for this opportunity to submit testimony on appropriations for FY 2025. Together with Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the overseas relief and development agency for the U.S. Catholic Church, we urge you to appropriate funding for the international poverty-reducing humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding accounts in the table below.

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Appropriations Account</b>	<b>Amount in \$,000</b>
USAID	Maternal Health and Child Survival	\$940,000
USAID	Nutrition	\$172,500
USAID	Vulnerable Children (orphans and displaced)	\$32,500
USAID	Malaria, TB, Global Health Security & other NTDs	\$2,403,500
DOS/PEPFAR	HIV/AIDS (State Funding/PEPFAR)	\$4,725,000
USAID	Development Assistance (including water, education)	\$4,769,787
USAID/OFDA	International Disaster Assistance	\$4,850,000
DOS/PRM	Migration and Refugee Assistance	\$4,211,188
DOS/PRM	Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance	\$100,000
USAID	Complex Crises Fund and Atrocities Prevention Board	\$60,000
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation	\$937,000
DOS/IO	Contributions to International Peacekeeping Activities	\$1,234,144
DOS/IO	Peacekeeping Operations	\$411,050
DOS/IO	Green Climate Fund	\$1,000,000
DOS/IO	Combatting Trafficking in Persons	\$123,900

In his 2020 encyclical on fraternity and social friendship, [\*Fratelli Tutti\*](#), Pope Francis teaches, “The decision to include or exclude those lying wounded along the roadside can serve as a criterion for judging every economic, political, social and religious project. Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders.” (#69) Such international assistance demonstrates our nation’s compassion and gives life to our values as a nation and as a world leader.

Our assistance cannot stop there. Pope Francis stated in his 2013 apostolic exhortation, [\*Evangelii Gaudium\*](#) (The Joy of the Gospel), “The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed...Inequality is the root of social ills” (#202). He adds that the growing inequality in the world “eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve” (#60).

At a time when the world media focuses on the Israel-Hamas war, the war in Ukraine and the growing rivalry between the United States and China, it is important now more than ever that we increase our attention and compassion to countries like Myanmar, Nicaragua, Haiti, and to Africa

where hundreds of millions of people struggle to deal with the root causes of persistent conflict, hunger, and unprecedented displacement. Given the shocking rise of conflict and repression concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), this testimony will focus its analysis on the sub-continent, emphasizing that the review and recommendations pertain to all peoples living in poverty and repression. We appreciate the United States Government’s Africa Leaders’ Summit in 2022, the Summit for Democracy in 2023, the revised strategy on SSA, and the recent ten-year plans for the Global Fragility Act Strategy (GFAS).

Despite this, the 1.2 billion people of SSA struggle to overcome multiple existential challenges:

- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke of [“an epidemic” of coups](#) in which some military leaders feel they have total impunity” and “can do whatever they want because nothing will happen to them.
- In just four years (2020-2023), seven countries—Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon—have fallen to [military coups](#). [Of the 18 coups recorded globally since 2017](#), all but one - Myanmar in 2021 - have been in Africa.
- [Fatalities linked to militant Islamist violence](#) rose by 20 percent in the past year (from 19,412 in 2022 to 23,322)—a record level of lethal violence. This represents a near doubling in deaths since 2021. This surge put the Sahel at the top of the annual [Global Terrorism Index](#)—accounting for 43% of all deaths from terrorist attacks in the world.
- Seven countries in Africa (Gabon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Uganda, Togo, Congo-Brazzaville) are led by Presidents, or their sons after decades of fraudulent elections and stifling repression.
- In Sudan around 11 million people, more than eight million of whom since the start of the war on April 15, 2023, have had to flee their homes. United Nations and humanitarian organizations are warning about an imminent famine and Sudan experiencing the [“world’s largest hunger crisis.”](#)

In this context [Afrobarometer](#) in a Brookings Institute ForeSight Africa 2024 report argues that, “Governance deficits continue to plague the region as elected governments fail to address crime and insecurity, widespread corruption, official impunity, and inadequate infrastructure and basic services.” The same report points out that since 2014 a growing number of Africans believe that their countries are less democratic than before. Worse still Afrobarometer warns that, “the failure of governments to deliver democratic and accountable governance sets the scene for confrontation between Africans and their political authorities in the coming years.”

Despite the dearth of good governance in Africa, the good news is that Africans overwhelmingly desire democratic rule. The [2021-2023 Afrobarometer survey](#) found that two-thirds of respondents say they prefer democracy to any other system of government. Eight in ten reject “one man rule” and “one-party rule,” while nearly seven in ten opposed military rule. The same survey found that, “Citizens also strongly endorsed norms, institutions, and practices associated with democratic governance, such as choosing political leaders through the ballot box (76%), constitutional limit on presidential tenure (72%), presidential compliance with court rulings (69%), parliamentary oversight of the executive (67%), media freedom (65%), multiparty competition (64%), and accountable governance (61%).” To return to a key issue that Pope Francis has focused on in his pontificate, it is the structural causes of poverty like governance, that we must address if we are to assist Africa to rise out of poverty and conflict.

We must sadly start with the premise that government leaders in many Africa states are unwilling to give up their privileges and promote the common good. For decades good governance has been denied willfully by those who hold seats of power. Although Africa has made significant strides in many health, education and economic indicators, she still lags far behind the rest of the world and the gap is widening. In addition, the Fund for Peace Fragile State Index finds that thirteen out of the twenty most fragile states are in SSA. In these conditions, citizens and civil society groups will have to organize and mobilize their forces to win the democracy and good governance that they desire. The recent experience in Senegal, and past examples in Burkina Faso and Sudan give some hope that they can succeed.

Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes open and inclusive participatory government to promote the common good, integral human dignity, peace and prosperity. Short of this, vital international assistance can help people survive, but not thrive if they remain trapped in poverty and conflict. People's dignity is denied by daily acts of corruption, neglect, repression, and civil war and every time an election is denied, or defrauded, the Constitution is violated, or the common good and human dignity are violated. As *Dignitatis Humanae* reminds us, a government must also create conditions supporting religious freedom, not only so people can fulfill their religious duties, but also in order that society itself may profit by the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in men's faithfulness to God (paragraph 6). In 2021 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria came to the harsh conclusion that, "*Serious insecurity, clearly evident in widespread loss of lives and property, for long unaddressed, has left the sad and dangerous impression that those who have assumed the duty and authority to secure the nation are either unable – or worse still, unwilling – to take up the responsibilities of their office.*"

The Church in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have for years decried internal civil and regional wars, corruption, and fraudulent elections, but their calls have been ignored. Since 2006 the bishops of the DRC have monitored national elections in the hopes of electing credible democratic leaders to no avail. In April 2024 they launched a program called "Inclusive Peace and Governance," designed to equip Congolese citizens to be agents of change through advocacy training, mobilization and national consultations to develop a new social contract to demand and build legitimate and responsive government. Building off the Church's own principles of nonviolence, the Church in South Sudan made the bold decision to adopt active nonviolent strategies inspired by other religious leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Reverend Martin Luther King. They hope to mediate between the two public leaders who are responsible for the civil war that has plagued their people since 2013. The Church has come to the realization that their prophetic voice is no longer sufficient. They must now lead their people, empower, and mobilize them to reclaim peacefully their God-given dignity.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church professes that, "Recognizing that natural law is the basis for and places limits on positive law means admitting that it is legitimate to resist authority should it violate in a serious or repeated manner the essential principles of natural law" ([paragraph 400](#)). The Church encourages the participation of the human person in the political order, active civil society, and related decision making. The Church would emphasize mobilization and empowerment of people to realize such inherent dignity.

**Strategic Recommendations:** The State Department and USAID should:

- Move beyond short term attempts to ‘manage’ corruption, fraudulent elections, repression of civil society, and overt, or latent violence in fragile societies in the hope of maintaining ‘good’ diplomatic relations and/or future economic/political wins.
- Build upon our nation’s history, values, and reputation to assist people to build and defend democracy and people’s peaceful efforts to protect their human dignity and their basic rights without discrimination.
- Develop a new, long-term strategy to build a vibrant and peaceful civil society, especially faith-based and youth groups capable of promoting the common good.
- Work with regional peacebuilding groups like the West Africa Network for Peace.
- Partner with American civil society organizations who empower civil society in Africa to develop and disseminate strategies and tactics to persuade repressive governments to adopt democratic institutions and practices and allow peaceful civil society to flourish.
- Ensure the Global Fragility Act succeeds by investing in local communities-civil society-security force partnerships to resolve local divisions and conflict and build community cohesion that will withstand the allure and tactics of terrorist and other armed groups.
- Radically increase funding for and speed up the implementation of good governance, conflict prevention/resolution, peacebuilding, social cohesion programs concentrating especially on FBO’s, the youth and women in society who have fueled peaceful social mobilization in countries like Senegal, Burkina Faso and Sudan in recent years.

Finally, while we will always support the life-saving work advanced by Congress, we do have grave concerns about providing taxpayer funding for activities inconsistent with right reason and basic human rights that Catholic teaching provides. We therefore strongly urge Congress to maintain the longstanding, bipartisan, and life-saving Helms Amendment and all related pro-life riders in the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations bill. The USCCB will oppose any bill that expands taxpayer funding of abortion, including any appropriations bill. Furthermore, consistent with our longstanding support for the Mexico City policy, we strongly urge you to apply the Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance policy to the bill.