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Answering the bell

Aid partner calls, Judsonia church stuffs container with rice, supplies for Somalia



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Somalis facing food shortages are being helped by international charities, including Life Resources International of Judsonia.

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International relief work is old hat to John Kachelman, minister at Judsonia Church of Christ.

His small congregation regularly sends emergency supplies to countries around the world. And as president of Life Resources International — a Judsonia-based ministry supported by several churches — he has organized supply shipments to devastated and impoverished areas around the planet, from Afghanistan to Zambia.

It's not unusual for Kachelman to be busy overseeing multiple humanitarian aid shipments at once. Last week alone he secured three containers of supplies bound for Ukraine. So when one of his longtime humanitarian aid partners called asking for help feeding starving refugees in Somalia, Kachelman put out the call for supplies.

As usual, his network of churches responded.

Last week, students from Harding University in Searcy and volunteers from area churches divided 20,000 pounds of rice into 10-pound bags for distribution in Somalia. The seemingly daunting task took less than two hours.

"We received the rice in 50-pound bags but it's impractical to give it to people that way," Kachelman said. "We're trying to make sure our distributor will be able to take one item and give it to one family and that [10-pound] bag ought to feed a family for several days."

With help from churches throughout the state, Kachelman is sending a 40-foot container to northern Somalia. The country, located in the Horn of Africa, has been devastated by war and now by famine and a severe drought. According to UNICEF, which has been working in the country since the 1970s, more than 300,000 children are facing starvation.

In addition to rice, the volunteers have packed clothing and buckets filled with supplies for families, as well as kits of hygiene products.

The effort is being done in cooperation with Counterpart International, a Virginia-based organization that works to feed the hungry around the world and to teach them the skills needed to grow a secure food source. The group has been working with Churches of Christ since 1998 due to Kachelman's involvement.

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"We have a pretty long-standing relationship and we've responded to various needs around the world," said Rang Hee Kim, director of humanitarian programs for Counterpart.

Kim said Kachelman and the Churches of Christ are playing an invaluable role in responding to the request for help in Somalia.

When the organization sees a need or receives a request for help, Kim first calls her contacts in the foreign country to assess the situation. She then puts out the call for help in the United States. Kachelman is one of many church leaders Kim contacts when a need arises.

In Somalia, the shipments will be sent to the semi-autonomous northern region. The United States hasn't had an embassy in the country since 1991.

"A lot of people from the south are migrating up north in search of shelter, water and safety, and these communities already affected by the drought are bearing the burden of hosting them," she said.

Kim said the supplies will not only help the refugees from the south but also those living in the north. She said pictures she has received from her Somali contacts show a desperate situation.

"It's really terrible," Kim said. "The water quality is not good, and it's a pretty delicate situation. I'm pleased we are able to help the massive number of migrants, and what I'm especially happy about is that we can help the people migrating up north without the threat of our commodities ending up in the hands of the wrong people."

Since the organization began working in Somalia 10

years ago, they've made 19 aid shipments with a total value of \$3.7 million, Kim said.

Kachelman said working with a group like Counterpart has advantages. The organization knows the needs, already has long-term in-country contacts and is able to get supplies quickly to the people.

"Last year we were one of the first to really get food distributed into Haiti [after that nation's devastating earthquake]," Kachelman said. "A lot of food was left sitting at the airport, and I'm glad to say with the contacts we have, we were able to get our food to the people."

In Somalia, Kachelman is concerned about getting the food to the hungry without having it intercepted by pirates at sea or by terrorist groups active in the south. But by routing supplies to the northern area of the country, they hope to avoid areas of conflict.

"The main concern we are trying to address is immediate relief," he said. "We're trying to send food and as many health and hygiene items as we can."

Kachelman said he has received help from churches in

the state, as well as from Louisiana, New York and from as far away as Belgium.

"Anyone that's interested is welcome to join in," he said.

Last year, Life Resources International sent containers of supplies to 19 countries, and so far this year shipments have been sent to Haiti, India, Nigeria, Ukraine and the Kyrgyz Republic. Kachelman said the key is to make sure they send only those supplies that are needed.

"Each nation is different," Kachelman said. "We want to make sure what we send will do some good."

Kachelman said he hopes to send more help to Somalia but knows it all depends on fundraising and donations. Shipping can cost up to \$10,000 per container. But even that is a small price to pay, he said.

"We're sending 40,000 pounds of commodities," he said. "It seems like a lot of money but when you look at what it can do, you're sending a container worth many times more than that."

Kachelman said he hopes the supplies will show the people of Somalia that Americans care for them.

"We want them to have a good impression of our country and of Christianity," he said. "That may help in the long run more than anything else we could possibly do."

Kachelman said his congregation of 100 is always busy with similar mission work. He said their focus is simple — they are more interested in serving others than themselves.

"We try to be good servants and servants don't demand much," he said. "They are thankful for what they have, and that's the attitude

Christians ought to have."

Ultimately, Kachelman said, the small church has a big impact because it's able to solicit help from other compassionate congregations and individuals.

"They give tremendously," he said. "It's what everybody does together. If it was just up to us we wouldn't be able to do anything."

Information is available online at counterpart.org.