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The Face of Famine in South Sudan: A Call to Bridge the Humanitarian- Development-Diplomacy Divide

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Current situation

In 2017, famine and near-famine conditions were reported in four countries: South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and parts of northeastern Nigeria. About 20 million people in these countries were at risk of starvation. A further 10 million people could join them in 2018.

Famine as a technical term means that specific criteria have been met. One of these is that at least 30 percent of young children are acutely malnourished. Famine conditions were present in parts of Unity State, South Sudan, from February through June 2017. In February 2018, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned that famine was once again imminent in South Sudan.¹ But even before a famine is declared, conditions are deadly. The only other famine this century, in Somalia, was declared in July 2011—but half of the 260,000 deaths took place before then.

The crisis in South Sudan is due to conflict. War has destroyed crops, health centers, and other necessities of life; trapped people in areas with no food; and caused the near-collapse of the economy. Women and children are most vulnerable to the effects of food insecurity, malnutrition, and conflict. Children who survive malnutrition before age 2 face irreversible lifelong damage to their health and their physical and cognitive development. *Even short bouts of hunger and malnutrition carry long-term consequences.* The latest estimates are that more than 1 million children younger than 5 are acutely malnourished, including more than 273,600 suffering



UNICEF/Modola

from severe acute malnutrition (SAM), which is fatal if not treated.²

More than 4 million people—approximately one-third of the entire population—have fled their homes. The conflict has affected nearly everyone and exacerbated deep economic and social problems in a country whose human development indicators (e.g., life expectancy) were already among the weakest in the world.

Resolving the crisis in South Sudan requires saving as many lives as possible, ending the senseless conflict that has led to famine, and shifting the orientation of the global humanitarian and development community from “delivering aid” to “ending need.”

“I believe firmly that the reason for foreign assistance must be to end the need for its existence, and that means working to end the root causes of famine, conflict, and insecurity, and helping to build resilient communities and families and governments as well.”

— Mark Green, Administrator, USAID

The way forward:

The following are some priority actions:

PROVIDE MORE AND IMPROVED ASSISTANCE.

Increase flexible, needs-based funding for the South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan and the South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan, which are both underfunded.

- Where possible, purchase food locally and/or regionally, both to reduce the cost of humanitarian assistance and to stimulate local and regional markets.
- Support host countries—Providing humanitarian assistance to the large number of South Sudanese people who have fled to neighboring countries is essential to sustaining regional stability, particularly within and among the refugees' host countries. Assistance for host countries' systems and infrastructure should be included in humanitarian efforts—e.g., for nutrition, education, health, and agriculture. Excluding the hosts puts a very heavy burden on the limited resources of countries that have already taken in hundreds of thousands of people who are not their citizens.
- Use diplomacy to ensure that the government and all opposition groups allow humanitarian aid to reach communities affected by malnutrition.

ENFORCE AN ARMS EMBARGO.

- Consistent U.S. leadership could persuade the U.N. Security Council to endorse and enforce a global arms embargo. The United States should work with other countries to stop the sale and/or importation of any additional weapons into South Sudan.
- The international community should also combine efforts to curtail illicit financial transfers and money laundering by national, regional, and international networks, including banks.

SUPPORT EFFORTS TO REACH A PEACE AGREEMENT.

Humanitarian assistance is important, but it is not enough to stabilize and resolve the worsening situation in South Sudan.

- Support the efforts of local peace negotiators. This is crucial to rebuilding trust and understanding among individuals and governing institutions. Without building peace at the local level, the risk of a proliferation of armed groups increases.
- Facilitate broader, more inclusive participation in country-level peace efforts, such as the South Sudan Council of Churches initiative and the government-led national dialogue.

Endnotes

¹ Famine Once Again a Threat in South Sudan. Available from: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/famine-once-again-a-threat-in-south-sudan-new-report-says-1.3818819>.

² World Bank. *Giving Voice to the Poor*.



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