



United States Institute of Peace

**Flashing Red: The State of Global Humanitarian
Affairs**

**Testimony before the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

Nancy Lindborg

President

United States Institute of Peace

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Introduction

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the looming threat of four concurrent famines. Your continued attention and concern for these crises is more important than ever.

I testify before you today as the president of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), although the views expressed here are my own. USIP was established by Congress more than 30 years ago as a bipartisan, national institute dedicated to the proposition that peace is possible, practical and essential to our national and global security. USIP works directly in conflict affected countries to provide partners with the practical tools, analysis, training and resources they need to prevent, manage and resolve violent conflict. We know there will always be conflict, and when it is managed well, conflict can actually be transformative. Only when it becomes violent does conflict become destructive, tearing apart communities and countries, creating regional and international security threats, and as we are talking about today, pushing millions of people into famine.

Implications of Famine

The international community is faced today with the gut wrenching specter of four concurrent famines. An estimated 20 million people are already at risk of starving to death within the next six months in north-eastern Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen and South Sudan, where famine was declared just over a month ago. This is equivalent to the entire state of Florida at risk of starvation. According to UN authorities, \$4.4 billion in international humanitarian assistance is needed by July “to avert a catastrophe”.

It is important to underscore that as used today, "famine" is a highly technical designation based on specific metrics. It is not used lightly. In order for the United Nations to officially declare a famine, three important conditions must be met. Twenty percent of the population must have fewer than 2100 kilocalories of food available per day; more than thirty percent of children must be acutely malnourished; and two deaths per day in every 10,000 people or four deaths per day in every 10,000 children must be being caused by lack of food.

By the time these metrics are met, death is already pervasive. According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), nearly half of starvation deaths during the 2011-2012 Somali famine occurred before famine was declared. Children under five years old made up the largest percentage of casualties, accounting for more than 29,000 deaths. For those children who survive, chances are very high that they have experienced severe malnutrition and will suffer irreversible harm to their cognitive and physical capabilities.

By the time the international community declares a famine, it is essentially issuing a declaration that a humanitarian disaster has already occurred.

Famine is rarely if ever caused by food shortages. In the 1980s, economist Amartya Sen challenged long held assumptions in *Democracy as Freedom* with the assertion that, “No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy,” arguing that democratic governments “have to win elections and face public criticism, and have strong incentive to undertake measures to avert famines and other catastrophes.”

Instead, famine occurs in fragile states that are vulnerable to natural disasters and highly prone to violent conflict. An estimated 1.2 billion people currently live in countries affected by violent conflict, poverty and increasingly violent extremism. Starvation has been used as a weapon of war in conflicts across time. Instances of armed groups seizing or killing livestock, destroying food stocks, dismantling markets and employing siege tactics span history, including in each of these four countries.

Twenty years ago, one of my great mentors, Ells Culver, described to me the horror of watching women and children literally crawl across the border from Ethiopia into Kenya to reach assistance during the Ethiopian famine of 1984, vowing he would dedicate his life to preventing that from happening again.

In 2011, when the worst drought in 60 years brought devastation once again to the Horn of Africa, it was only Somalia -- a dysfunctional government locked in a protracted armed conflict with the terrorist group Al Shabaab, which controlled large swaths of territory and denied humanitarian access -- that tipped into famine. I remember with terrible clarity the Saturday in July 2011, when I got a call from a colleague telling me that famine was being declared in Somalia. It was a gut wrenching moment, and I thought a lot about Ells.

I have worked in the humanitarian field for more than 20 years, and each passing year confirms for me the imperative of getting ahead of these crises and focusing on how to prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflict, which is the distinct congressionally mandated mission of the U.S. Institute of Peace. Even as we respond with immediate help, we must urgently address the causes of these famines.

Famine and Conflict

The four nations currently facing famine, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen, are each distinct and complex in their own way, but they share important attributes. Each nation is characterized by:

- Weak governance at the national levels and/or local levels;

- Ineffective institutions;
- High levels of corruption;
- Periods of prolonged and intense armed conflict;
- Failing economies;
- A break down in domestic political order; and
- Difficult or blocked humanitarian access.

This is to say that all four countries are mired in states of fragility.

Last year, I partnered with former Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy at the Defense Department Michele Flournoy, CEO of the Center for a New American Security, to conduct an independent, non-partisan Senior Study Group on Fragility. Building on two decades of scholarship, the Fragility Study Group report characterized fragility as the absence or breakdown of a social contract between people and their government. Fragile states suffer from deficits of institutional capacity and political legitimacy that increase the risk of instability and violent conflict and sap the state of its resilience to disruptive shocks. Fragile states are highly correlated with violent conflict, violent extremism, extreme poverty and vulnerability to natural disasters, and the predations of other powers.

Somalia (1), South Sudan (2), Yemen (4) and Nigeria (13) are ranked among the most fragile states in the world according to the Fund for Peace 2016 Fragile States Index.

Meanwhile, the most recent Global Terrorism Index and Global Peace Index places these four countries among the most terror-affected and least peaceful nations on earth. Each of these nations are contending with competing tribal, religious or clan-based identity politics while being wracked by violent conflict and terror.

Nigeria

Despite the early optimism around the election of President Buhari and his renewed focus on defeating Boko Haram, this terrorist group continues to leverage the region's historic marginalization, chronic poverty and poor education system to gain new recruits from Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states in Northern Nigeria - the states at the center of Nigeria's looming famine. More than 2 million people have been displaced since 2012 by Boko Haram, leaving behind fallow land and fields devoid of cattle, closed markets and escalating food prices. With villages empty and fertile ground untended, Boko Haram has taken to stealing what few cattle and food remains. More than 5 million people are now in crisis, most of them children. The crisis is now becoming a regional crisis, with emergencies declared in Chad, Niger and Cameroon as well. Humanitarian access, previously very difficult due to insecurity and government hurdles, is now dramatically scaled up, although with significant funding constraints.

Somalia

Despite heartening gains over the last five years, with recent peaceful elections delivering a new president, Somalia is once again suffering another round of destructive droughts. At the same time, Al Shabaab is again expanding its influence, undercutting fragile political progress. An estimated 363,000 children are currently malnourished and over 6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, the highest numbers since the 2011 famine. However, international assistance to the region faces many of the same challenges presented five years ago. There is significant concern that Al Shabaab could act as spoilers in any humanitarian intervention, potentially diverting aid or denying agencies access to effected populations.

Yemen

Over the past 24 months, the insurgency in Yemen has escalated into a full-scale civil war, with Houthi and loyalist forces clashing while terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIL feed on the conflict and sectarianism. The war and insurgency, which has killed 16,200 people since 2015, has pushed the Arabian Peninsula's poorest country to the brink of famine. I visited Yemen in 2012, when I first learned of the startling levels of nationwide stunting, and even then, an estimated 44% of the population was in need of humanitarian assistance. Now, two years into a nationwide conflict, the World Food Program estimates that 80% of the population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, while 14 million are estimated to be food insecure due to the conflict. Humanitarian access is constrained by poor security and a dismal level of funding, with only 7.4% requested funding raised to date.

South Sudan

Using the metrics described above, the South Sudan Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) on February 20 declared a famine in two counties of Unity State, Leer and Mayendit. Insufficient data is limiting the ability to apply that declaration in other areas, but all indications are of famine or near famine conditions in a larger swath of the country. Some 4.8 million people – nearly one person in every three in South Sudan – are severely food insecure, and one in every five people in South Sudan have been forced to flee their homes since the civil war began three years ago. More than 440,000 South Sudanese have fled to Uganda, turning one grassland area into one of the world's largest refugee camps in just six months.

While South Sudan is not engaged in conflict with terrorist organizations, it is deeply divided and perilously close to descending into a second genocide. Despite an August 2015 peace agreement, violence has spread for the past eight months while the humanitarian situation has continued to deteriorate. The government has consistently blocked access to humanitarian assistance, including a recent decision to charge aid workers \$10,000 for a visa. Continued fighting, government hurdles and lack of infrastructure mean that food is being airlifted into remote areas as the only means of reaching those in dire need.

All four of these famine-affected countries are suffering massive displacement. Yemen (3.1 million displaced); Nigeria (1.8 million displaced); South Sudan (1.7 million displaced); and Somalia (1.2 million displaced) are all struggling to manage huge flows of people, many of whom are extremely malnourished. To give a sense of scale, the 1.4 million people that have been displaced in Nigeria's Borno state alone is roughly 40 percent more than reached Europe by boat in 2015.

Famine also has a negative cascading impact on neighboring countries, as this type of large-scale displacement generates security problems, places strains on infrastructure, weakens economies, increases criminality and exacerbates tensions between refugees, locals and government officials.

Resilience

In the wake of the devastating 1984 Ethiopian famine, USAID pushed for more effective ways of responding to humanitarian crises, including the development of the Famine Early Warning System (Fewsnet), which was created by USAID with the leadership of Greg Gottlieb who testified here earlier. Fewsnet is still a powerful tool today, using an array of data to provide early warnings of impending food crises. However, other efforts were unfortunately not sustained.

The successive droughts of 2011-12 in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel triggered a renewed push to find more effective ways to address recurring cyclical droughts that continually undercut development progress in these areas. The U.S. government provided global leadership with a vigorous commitment to early action in response to early warning, developing new policies and tools for generating greater resilience in the face of recurrent risks, and partnering with international, regional and country level government to align efforts for managing and reducing risks. USAID adopted a new agency-wide policy and organized a new resilience office to span relief and development efforts for greater sustained impact.

Progress has been heartening, with evidence in Kenya and Ethiopia that investments by both the national governments and international donors in building resilience to the shock of droughts is protecting millions of people from falling into greater crisis during the current drought that is again gripping the region.

However, in the last decade, humanitarian assistance flows have shifted from 80% of global aid going to victims of natural disasters to now 80% going to assist victims of violent conflict. In the last three years, UN humanitarian appeals have risen from \$16.2 billion in 2012 to the current UN Global Appeal of \$22.6 billion, driven almost entirely by a toxic brew of violent conflict,

disease and drought -- including now the four impending famines. The urgent challenge now is to address those drivers of violent conflict that are fueling a worldwide humanitarian crisis

Recommendations

These four pending famines present an extraordinary humanitarian challenge, as well a rising set of regional and international security threats. Addressing these crises will require urgent and sustained U.S. global leadership to mobilize partners and action.

Urgent humanitarian action: The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is appealing for \$5.6 billion in 2017 to address famines in Yemen, South Sudan, Nigeria and Somalia, \$4.4 billion of which is required urgently by June to massively scale up efforts and avert an even graver crisis in the four countries. The U.S. government is the leading contributor of humanitarian assistance, although as a percentage of gross national income (GNI), the U.S. ranks 19th. Without significant contributions from the U.S. government, it is less able to catalyze contributions from other donors and meet even minimal life-saving needs for life-saving food, medical assistance and shelter immediately. Our urgent action is a deep reflection of who we are as Americans, and action now can make the difference between life and death for millions of children, women and men.

Continued investment in resilience: U.S. government leadership and support is also vital for ensuring sustained progress in more effective and efficient humanitarian delivery. A range of changes are already underway to enable smarter assistance, including more flexible funding that enables greater support for local actors, greater ability to tailor response to needs on the ground and bridging the gap between relief and development for more sustained results, including a focus on managing the risks that otherwise upend U.S. development investments. More innovative financing is critical, such as insurance for areas chronically hit by natural disaster. Many of these approaches were highlighted at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, along with the commitment to broaden the pool of donors.

Increased focus on addressing drivers of violent conflict: Ultimately, the U.S. will not be able to address these four famines or other humanitarian crises with humanitarian responses alone. As noted in the Fragility Study Group report, the US needs to use all its tools--development, diplomacy and security--in a strategic, selective, systemic and sustained effort to address the fragility that repeatedly results in grave humanitarian and security crises. Countries like Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and the northwest region of Nigeria have all been trapped in multiple cycles of conflict. Without addressing the deeper drivers of these conflicts, the U.S. can be assured of continued cycles of humanitarian need. Instead, we need to get ahead of these crises instead of relying on late and more costly -- both in financial and human terms -- responses.

Decades of research has resulted in well-established lessons that peaceful, sustained progress requires security and justice for all citizens; legitimate governments characterized by inclusive politics and accountable institutions; locally-led solutions; inclusive economic growth; and sustained engagement by the international community. Countries lacking those elements are more likely to plunge into crisis, as illustrated by the four countries we are discussing today.

Without question, progress requires local partners -- whether at the local or national level -- for meaningful progress. There is no simple prescription, but the U.S. government can articulate a way forward and play a leadership role in shaping a response that can save lives and ultimately get ahead of these crises.

Thank you, Senators, for your continued focus and attention to this critical issue. I look forward to answering your questions.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.