

## **“Why Food Security Matters”**

Written Statement of Matthew Nims, acting Director for the Office of Food for Peace, USAID  
Before the Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development, Multilateral Institutions, and  
International Economic, Energy, and Environmental Policy,  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
March 14, 2018

Chairman Young, Ranking Member Merkley, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to speak with you today about the importance of food assistance and the link between global food security and America’s economic prosperity and national security. I am grateful you are drawing attention to this subject and especially for your history of support for humanitarian efforts to help the world’s most vulnerable people.

I am Matthew Nims, Acting Director of USAID’s Office of Food for Peace (FFP), the largest provider of food assistance in the world. We use a range of tools, including U.S. commodities, locally and regionally procured food, food vouchers, cash transfers and other complementary activities, to reach the world’s most food insecure with life-saving assistance. Last year, our food assistance reached more than 70 million people in 53 countries.

We provide food assistance because it eases human suffering and represents our core American values of compassion and generosity. Helping feed those around the world in their time of need is the right thing to do but also makes America and her allies safer. Hunger and conflict are inextricably linked. Where hunger persists, instability grows. The opposite is also true: where conflict occurs, hunger follows.

The President’s national security strategy states that America should target threats at their source, catalyze international response to man-made and natural disasters and provide to those in need. As the 2016 Global Food Security Act states, “It is in the national interest of the United States to promote global food security.” A food-secure world where people are not worried about their children going to bed hungry is in the U.S. interest: stability helps ward off future conflict and prosperity opens new markets for U.S. exports and trade.

### **Hunger contributes to Conflict**

In November 2015, the National Intelligence Council linked hunger to political instability and conflict. The report stated that “the risk of food insecurity in many countries will increase during the next 10 years and declining food security will almost certainly contribute to social disruptions and large-scale political instability or conflict.” Ten years have not passed, but this prediction has likely already proven true.

Hunger often serves as a measurable warning signal for predicting conflict. According to the 2014 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, “food and nutrition insecurity in weakly governed countries might also provide opportunities for insurgent groups to capitalize on poor conditions, exploit international food aid, and discredit governments for their inability to address basic needs.” In every year since, food security has been mentioned at least

once in the assessments. The Fund for Peace Fragile States Index also uses food and nutrition as an indicator of fragile states. In 2017, FFP operated in all of the top 10 countries listed in the fragility report and 21 of the top 25.

Events over the last decade demonstrate that acute hunger can trigger political instability. In 2008, food prices spiked and sparked riots and street demonstrations in more than 40 countries around the world, and may have contributed to toppling governments in Haiti and Madagascar. In 2010-2011, the first signs of the Arab Spring were riots in the streets of Tunisia over dramatic increases in food prices. Spikes in food prices in Algeria and Egypt triggered similar demonstrations. Hunger was by no means the sole cause of the Arab Spring, but it was an important catalyst.

Our own U.S. National Security Strategy states, “We will partner with our allies to alleviate the worst poverty and suffering, which fuels instability.” Tackling the root causes of hunger and malnutrition—and thus potential drivers of conflict—is essential to breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and laying the foundation for stable, inclusive growth. Equipping communities—especially women and children—with the tools to feed themselves mitigates extremely costly humanitarian assistance.

Through Feed the Future, USAID also supports long term food security programs that address the root causes of hunger in areas of chronic crisis to build resilience and food security of local communities. USAID’s long-term development activities save lives and livelihoods, grow national and regional economies, and diminish the unsustainable financial burden of recurrent humanitarian spending in the same places. A 2013 U.K. study estimates that every \$1 invested in resilience will result in \$3 in reduced humanitarian assistance needs and avoided losses over 15 years. A more recent USAID study confirms this estimated return, proving true the adage ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.’

President Trump has said that economic security is national security; USAID’s development activities are both. Our work not only helps to stabilize countries, it also creates new friends and allies, and new customers for American goods.

### **Conflict contributes to Hunger**

Conflict causes enormous social and economic devastation, and hunger is one of its first symptoms. Conflict prevents farmers from planting and harvesting crops, robbing them of their livelihoods and later robbing others of food to eat. Conflict prevents people from traveling to and from markets, making the food that is available inaccessible to some. Over time, conflict prevents people from living full, healthy lives because they are weakened from lack of food and fall victim to preventable illness. We see this clearly today in places like Yemen, South Sudan and besieged areas of Syria.

Around the world, hunger driven by conflict forces millions of people to face a choice no one should have to face: Stay where they are and starve, or run for their lives in search of food. They leave their families and friends behind and head into unknown danger to find food. More

than 65 million people are estimated to be displaced within their own countries or are refugees in other countries—an unprecedented number. Whether they stay in their own country or seek hope by crossing a border, those displaced by conflict are often dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive.

## **Syria**

Tomorrow, March 15<sup>th</sup>, marks the seventh anniversary of the conflict in Syria, which began with protests after President Bashar al-Assad failed to produce promised legislative reforms. This conflict has left 10.5 million people in Syria unable to meet basic needs—1.5 million more than 2017. Food prices have risen 800 percent since the conflict began. Displacement and lack of employment have pushed 85 percent of the country into poverty. Households are cutting back food consumption, spending savings and accumulating debt—actions that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, especially children.

Neighboring countries—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—today host 5.5 million Syrian refugees who in many cases lack legal pathways to work and depend on emergency food assistance. This strains host communities as they continue to bear the enormous cost of providing for these refugees.

So far in FY 2018, USAID, through the Office of Food for Peace, has provided nearly \$198 million to support efforts reaching approximately 2.35 million beneficiaries inside Syria and another one million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries each month. Inside Syria, our partners provide flour to bakeries, monthly household food parcels, ready-to-eat rations for recently displaced populations, and food vouchers. For Syrian refugees, FFP provides electronic food vouchers for use in supermarkets and local markets.

## **Yemen**

Conflict in Yemen has been ongoing for three years. Fighting has hampered commercial trade, which is devastating in a country that traditionally has imported 90 percent of its food and most of its fuel and medicine. Food that does make it to market is increasingly expensive, with some items doubling in price as supplies dwindle. These price increases dramatically affect the amount of food people can buy, while inconsistent payment of civil servant salaries reduces the amount of money families have to spend on food and other essentials.

As a result, 17.8 million people in Yemen are experiencing hunger, by far the largest food security emergency in the world. Yemen continues to face the risk of outright famine because—in a worst case scenario—the conflict could halt imports, disrupt trade and virtually stop our humanitarian assistance from reaching the populations who need it.

We have contributed \$130 million this fiscal year to support the UN World Food Program emergency food assistance operations in Yemen, helping WFP reach seven million people each month. We also provided UNICEF with American-made therapeutic nutritional products to treat children experiencing severe acute malnutrition and to support coordination efforts among humanitarian actors in Yemen.

In addition to directly providing food, USAID is helping improve access to food. On January 15, four USAID-supported mobile cranes arrived at Al Hudaydah Port and were first used on February 9. The cranes, each able to lift up to 60 tons, will bolster port capacity and speed the unloading of cargo, increasing the flow of goods to vulnerable populations.

### **South Sudan**

Years of violence in South Sudan has transformed the world's youngest nation into one of the world's most food-insecure nations. Despite collaborative humanitarian efforts to stave off famine throughout the conflict, famine was declared in parts of the country in February 2017. While a robust international humanitarian response—including U.S. efforts—did help roll back the famine four months later, food security continues to deteriorate across the country. This man-made crisis is a direct consequence of prolonged political conflict that ignores the urgent needs of the South Sudanese people. The failure reach a lasting political settlement makes the return of famine a real risk in the coming months.

In January 2018, nearly half of South Sudan's population—5.3 million people—required life-saving food assistance. The United States is the single largest donor to the South Sudan crisis response and our food reaches an average of 1.4 million people inside South Sudan every month.

### **Nigeria**

Years of conflict perpetuated by Boko Haram and more recently ISIS-West Africa, have triggered a humanitarian crisis in northeast Nigeria and surrounding countries in the Lake Chad Basin region. As of February 2018, the insurgency had displaced more than 1.6 million people within Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states and forced over 214,000 Nigerians to flee into neighboring Cameroon, Chad and Niger, leaving millions more across the region in need of humanitarian assistance. A combination of diminishing household food supplies, rising food prices and declining purchasing power is leaving more families without enough to eat.

Violence—including deliberate attacks and continued kidnapping of civilians and aid workers—prevents relief groups from reaching vulnerable communities and blocks communities' access to medical facilities and markets. Bureaucratic impediments are delaying the delivery of food and medical supplies. Thousands of people may have already experienced famine in hard-to-reach areas of Nigeria's Borno State, and many communities affected by this conflict remain at an elevated risk of famine.

USAID's Office of Food for Peace remains one of the largest donors of humanitarian assistance for Nigeria, providing \$68 million in FY 2018 for people affected by the ongoing crisis. With Food for Peace support, the UN World Food Program has reached, on average, one million Nigerians each month since December 2016. Combined with our NGO partners, we help more than two million Nigerians with emergency food assistance.

### **Somalia**

While drought is a primary driver of hunger in Somalia, political instability and conflict continue to prevent relief actors from reaching some vulnerable populations in rural areas. The situation is fragile and, in the absence of humanitarian assistance, 2.7 million Somalis face significant hunger.

USAID provides food-insecure Somali households and internally displaced people with emergency food and nutrition assistance. In FY 2018, we've provided more than \$59 million to partners for a variety of interventions including ready-to-use therapeutic foods to treat malnourished children.

### **Burma**

Attacks by armed actors on Burmese security posts in August 2017 and subsequent military operations in Rakhine state, home to the majority of Rohingya Muslims in the country, have caused a humanitarian crisis in Burma and neighboring Bangladesh. Lack of humanitarian access and ongoing population movement have left an unknown number of people in need of immediate food assistance in Rakhine State.

The violence in Burma has forced approximately 671,000 Rohingya refugees to flee to southeastern Bangladesh, joining more than 212,000 Rohingya living in the country prior to August 2017, according to the UN. Most of these refugees currently reside in temporary settlements near Cox's Bazar, where they are living in conditions well below humanitarian standards and suffer from hunger and high levels of malnutrition.

In response to the current crisis, USAID quickly mobilized assistance on both sides of the Burma/Bangladesh border. In 2017, USAID provided \$20.8 million to partners in Burma, including food, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene, health and protection assistance to vulnerable populations.

In FY 2018, FFP provided more than \$26 million to UN partners for refugees and host communities in Bangladesh. This assistance includes extensive emergency food, nutrition, capacity building, logistics and coordination support to ensure a rapid, effective scale-up of lifesaving services.

### **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

Many parts of the DRC continue to experience worsening conflict and widespread poverty, contributing to a doubling of population displacement, along with chronic hunger and restricted livelihood activities. Crises in the Kasai region and Tanganyika, North and South Kivu, and Ituri Provinces are displacing families, disrupting agriculture and impeding access to markets, health care and schools. There are approximately 4.5 million Congolese internally displaced and more than 540,000 refugees from neighboring countries in the DRC. Nearly 7.7 million Congolese are experiencing extreme hunger.

USAID provides U.S. in-kind food assistance and locally and regionally procured food to internally displaced populations, returnees and vulnerable host communities through general

food distributions, as well as cash transfers for food to refugees in difficult-to-access areas of the DRC. Furthermore, USAID collaborates with NGOs on longer-term food security activities that aim to improve agricultural production, maternal and child health and nutrition, civil participation and local governance, water and sanitation, natural resource management and biodiversity, and microenterprise productivity. These programs seek to strengthen household economic well-being and generate lasting gains in food and nutrition security.

### **Conflict Strains and Stresses Humanitarian Actors**

USAID is uniquely positioned to tackle hunger. When hunger is a driver of instability, our resilience activities connect with a broader set of food security and resilience investments in America's initiative to end global hunger, Feed the Future. We're tackling the underlying causes of hunger that, left unchecked, can lead to frustration and despair that can be exploited by terrorist groups and criminals. When hunger is a consequence of conflict, our emergency food assistance saves the lives of those displaced by violence.

I am proud of the U.S. government's actions, and we will continue to work alongside other donors, NGOs, UN agencies, and others to avert famine. But we are never focusing on just one country or region at a time and the scale and nature of the humanitarian crises in the world right now strains the humanitarian system enormously.

In 2018, the Famine Early Warning System Network estimates that 76 million people worldwide will need emergency food assistance. While that number decreased slightly from last year, the severity of needs has increased, largely due to conflict, leaving millions facing life-threatening hunger. Global chronic malnutrition is increasingly concentrated in conflict-affected countries and projections indicate that more than two-thirds of the world's poor could be living in fragile states by 2030.

Protracted, complex crises are taking up increasing amounts of scarce humanitarian resources and presenting unique challenges. USAID estimates that in FY 2018 over half of our humanitarian funding will be allocated toward just six major emergencies, nearly all conflict driven. Working in conflict means that the work we do is harder, more expensive, and more dangerous.

Humanitarian actors work tirelessly and at great personal risk to deliver life-saving assistance to those who need it most. But in conflict areas, they have been harassed, attacked, or killed, and relief supplies looted. According to the Aid Worker Security Database, 131 aid workers died in 2017, primarily in conflict areas. Syria and South Sudan—both protracted conflicts—were the deadliest locations (with 48 and 28 aid worker deaths, respectively). Parties on all sides of conflict must stop impeding relief efforts by ceasing hostilities and allowing for unhindered access.

### **Food Assistance is a Band-Aid, not a Cure to Conflict-driven Hunger**

USAID is committed to assisting as many people as possible, maximizing the impact of our resources and working to leverage assistance from others. But humanitarian work involves

making tough decisions. We're continually seeking ways to make our dollars stretch further, to reach the most people with the assistance they urgently need.

In order to respond to a world dominated by large, protracted, conflict-driven crises—our new normal—USAID needs all the tools possible at its disposal. In Yemen, where nearly all food is imported, the best way to respond is with U.S. in-kind food. For Syrian refugees, who are spread across the region and live in urban environments where markets function, electronic vouchers and cash make the most sense.

Our emergency food assistance does not operate in a vacuum, separate from others in the U.S. Government. We rely on our sister office, the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, to provide support beyond food in times of crisis; we work with the Department of State to provide non-food support for refugees; and we work alongside the Department of Defense when humanitarian assistance requires additional support to reach those who need it. These coordinated efforts mean that we're more effective than we would be if we tried to do our work alone. In a world as complex as ours, with our national security under greater threat than ever, we must bring to bear the entirety of our statecraft toolbox.

The United States also cannot and should not do it alone—we need all of our UN, NGO, affected government, and donor partners working together to tackle these challenges. Last month, Administrator Green joined with his counterpart in the U.K. and Grand Challenges Canada to announce a humanitarian grand challenge, calling for innovators around the world to submit ideas to save and improve the lives of those affected by humanitarian crises caused by conflict. We will invest a combined \$15 million over five years to enable governments and the private sector to work together to more nimbly respond to complex emergencies.

In addition to emergency responses, the United States relies on bilateral and multilateral channels to engage with foreign governments, international organizations and other partners to address the root causes of conflict-driven hunger. Only then can we move away from the dire human cost and financial burden of humanitarian responses to these conflicts, and toward prosperity and stability.

We are also helping to implement the President's goal of lessening the burden on the United States to respond by urging other donors, including non-traditional donors, to increase their share of funding for humanitarian assistance. The United States will also continue to challenge international and non-governmental relief organizations to become more efficient and effective in order to make U.S. taxpayer dollars go farther by maximizing the benefit to recipients of assistance.

Thank you for your attention to these issues and for the support Congress has provided to USAID and specifically our humanitarian programs over the years. Please know that your support transforms and saves lives every day.