



**STATEMENT BY DAVID BEASLEY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
UN WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME**

**As submitted to the**

**SENATE STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS, AND RELATED PROGRAMS  
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE**

**Wednesday, 11 May 2022**

*This brief is being provided on a voluntary basis and should not be understood to be a waiver, express or implied, of the privileges and immunities of the United Nations and its officials under the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations.*

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Graham, members of the Senate State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Subcommittee, thank you for convening this hearing on the dramatic need for resources to address the growing threat of starvation around the world.

I want to thank this Subcommittee for your support of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). The United States is WFP's most generous and longstanding partner. Last year, the United States provided \$3.86 billion in support to WFP, and a considerable amount was provided through programs under this committee's jurisdiction.

And many thanks are in order in this moment. I commend the Biden Administration for the recent release of the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust and the chorus of support from lawmakers on Capitol Hill that made that possible. I also thank Congress for including emergency humanitarian assistance for the Ukraine crisis in the FY22 omnibus spending package signed into law on March 16. We are hopeful that a considerable portion of those resources can be directed to the worsening hunger emergency occurring within and beyond Ukraine.

I would also like to thank the United States Agency for International Development for its excellent cooperation and longstanding partnership. Despite this generous support, needs are still outpacing

resources. Today, I will outline the state of global hunger in the context of the Ukraine crisis, provide you with an update on WFP global needs and resourcing, and a picture of what might transpire should humanitarian responders like WFP not receive the resources required.

## **II. STATE OF GLOBAL HUNGER**

It is no secret that the world is not on track to achieve Zero Hunger. Progress toward this global goal was waning even before the Covid-19 pandemic produced economic turmoil and eroded food security. Currently, in the 81 countries where WFP operates, up to 276 million people are acutely food insecure and in need of urgent food, nutrition, and livelihoods assistance—in other words, marching towards starvation. This is a record high, and more than double the 135 million people living with acute hunger before the pandemic. Refugees, returnees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced persons are particularly vulnerable.

Among the 276 million, there are 48.9 million people living across 43 countries in even graver danger. They presently face severe hunger emergencies (IPC/CH Phase 4) – just one step from famine. To put the severity of these numbers into context, people in IPC 4 are in a state of “emergency conditions” where they are acutely hungry and are liquidating their final assets to do whatever they can to get food. They are exceptionally fragile, and many die from the impact of their hunger. Thirty percent of their children are wasting and many are now permanently stunted, undermining their ability to ever achieve their potential. This is not just a critical moment of hunger; it is a generational impact that will have consequences for decades to come.

And finally, there are 730,000 people languishing in IPC 5, a catastrophic condition of hunger which is the highest number on record since the 2011 famine in Somalia. About 400,000 of these souls are in Tigray in Ethiopia, and the others in parts of Yemen, Somalia and South Sudan. While famine has not officially been declared in these places because the technical thresholds have not yet been verified, the people living in them are experiencing the same horrific conditions. The very real risk that famines will be declared in 2022 is an admission of failure at a time when the world has enough resources, food and money to reach them.

While all of this is very bad news, it is about to get much worse.

## **III. THE UKRAINE CRISIS**

We cannot adequately speak to the current global hunger crisis without addressing the conflict in Ukraine and the ripple effects it has produced across the globe.

I have just returned from Odesa, my fifth trip to the region since Russia’s invasion on February 24. In Ukraine, Poland and Moldova, I witnessed the same heart-breaking scenes again and again: women and

children who weeks ago led safe, comfortable self-sufficient lives now suddenly struggling to survive in a world of the unknown – and lack of food is one of their major concerns. These are families who have never had to worry about food and did not need the world’s help to feed their families.

That has all changed. Last year, Ukraine grew enough food to feed 400 million people, but now the food they grew is unable to reach its own population because of this war. Ukraine has gone from being a global breadbasket to being on the breadlines. About 35 percent of the remaining population inside Ukraine have resorted to missing meals, reducing portion sizes, restricting adult consumption to feed children or borrowing food. To date, 3.6 million people have received help from WFP and we are preparing to serve 6 million by June, if needed. These people have every right to expect the global community to respond in their time of need.

But even greater concerns lie beyond Ukraine’s borders. The war is already causing “collateral hunger” all over the world. The tens of millions of tons of wheat, barley, maize and vegetable oil produced by Ukrainian farmers, are trapped in ports, silos and warehouses - threatened by the destruction of the infrastructure to get them to market and the blockade of ports in the Odesa area of southern Ukraine.

We urgently need these ports to reopen so that food being produced in the war-torn country can flow freely to the rest of the world before the current global hunger crisis spins out of control. Unless they are reopened, Ukrainian farmers will have nowhere to store the next harvest in July and August. The result will be mountains of grain going to waste while WFP and the world struggle to deal with an already catastrophic global hunger crisis. WFP urges all parties involved to allow this food to get out of Ukraine to where it is desperately needed so we can avert the looming threat of famine.

In recent years Ukraine and Russia became major engines for feeding the world, serving as critical suppliers to global markets for wheat, maize and other food commodities, as well as energy and fertilizer. This conflict has rocked global food and energy markets as exports from Ukraine have been halted by this war. Steep rises are occurring in international prices for basic staples – notably wheat, maize and vegetable oil – creating a food price environment that resembles the 2008 and 2011 crises. Given heavy reliance on world commodity markets by numerous countries, prices are rising even in places that do not source their wheat or maize directly from Ukraine or Russia. So in truth, instead of exporting food to help feed entire countries, the conflict means that Ukraine is now being forced to export hunger.

In the case of a prolonged conflict, we should expect the destruction of the commodities currently trapped in storage, worsening declines in Ukraine’s upcoming grain harvests and severe limits on its capacity to supply global markets. Countries that rely heavily on grain imports from the Black Sea, like Egypt, Lebanon and Yemen, will be greatly affected. To make matters worse, a lack of fertilizer supplies from Russia and

continuously high energy costs will further constrain yields in many countries far from Ukraine, especially across Africa. Some 25 countries depend on Russia for 30 percent or more of their fertilizers.

WFP now anticipates that in the countries where we operate, acute hunger could rise by 47 million people, from a pre-war baseline of 276 million people who were already in the grip of acute hunger. This means that **up to 323 million people could be facing crisis levels of acute food insecurity in the coming months.**

Let me be crystal clear: Conflict in Ukraine is quickly transforming a series of already terrible hunger crises into a global food crisis that the world cannot afford. A crisis of this scale will destabilize many parts of Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America and Central Asia.

#### IV. NEEDS AND RESOURCING

This dramatic turn of events leaves WFP in the position of serving the greatest number of people in its 60+ year history. In the face of Covid-19, multiple conflicts and climate-related crises, we aim this year to assist 147 million people. This is after reaching a record-breaking 128 million beneficiaries in 2021.

Unfortunately, we are doing this in a time of dramatically insufficient resources. WFP's assistance this year will cost approximately US\$21.5 billion. To say that our needs outstrip our funds would be a significant understatement -- today WFP faces a funding gap of over 50 percent. While WFP has historically faced funding shortfalls, they have not been as great as this in the past or surfaced in such a complicated environment. As other UN agency and government budgets are similarly under strain, many responders are forced to cut assistance at the same time. This makes cuts in WFP's assistance much more painful for recipients than in prior years.

The Ukraine conflict has further added to the funding gap by increasing WFP's operational costs and constraining its response at a time when it is needed the most. While other exporters of staple food commodities should—at least partially—be able to make up for the shortfall in supplies from the Black Sea region, these commodities are higher priced and moving them comes with significantly greater operational costs; shipping costs are now 4 times what they were in 2019. Buying from farther away means higher transport costs and longer delivery times—for WFP and everyone else dependent on purchases in international markets. WFP's operational costs are now \$71 million more per month than they were just two years ago, an increase of 44 percent. This is enough to feed 3.8 million people for one month.

Because of these increased costs, we have had to cut rations to our beneficiaries. In the past month in Yemen we have had to reduce rations to 8 million individuals who are already in IPC 3 and 4. We are being forced to make the terrible decision to literally take food from hungry children to give it to starving children. Those hungry children are now getting hungrier. This is also true for many of our beneficiaries in Niger,

Chad, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Mali, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and sadly the list goes on.

## V. IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL STABILITY

We have long known that war produces hunger; that has been true of every major conflict in human history and the world is seeing this dynamic unfold in real time in Ukraine today. But we have also observed that hunger itself can produce conflict and instability, creating a vicious cycle of deepening hunger fueling increasing conflict. This is what we should be afraid of today - the further weaponization of food.

In localized cases, we see how food insecurity produces conflict in a community because of competition over agricultural inputs like land and water. In other cases, a party will deliberately manipulate food supplies as a weapon of war. However, one of the most predictable ways that food insecurity can produce instability is through unexpected, rapid spikes in food prices or a lack of access to food. As prices of grains, oils and other basic commodities suddenly spike in countries around the world it is important that we realize the risks this portends. Recent history serves to warn us.

In 2007-08, a rapid increase in prices for major food staples produced social unrest in at least 40 developing and middle-income countries, and regime change in at least one. A former WFP Executive Director, Josette Sheeran, referred to this period as the "Silent Tsunami."

We saw food-related instability strike again in 2011 with a second wave of price spikes linked to the Arab Spring in the Middle East, which created social upheaval in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and especially Syria. It is not well known that the conflict in Syria was predated by what some experts have referred to as "the worst long-term drought and most severe set of crop failures since agricultural civilizations began in the Fertile Crescent many millennia ago." As a result of that drought, the southwestern city of Dara'a, situated in one of the traditionally fertile areas of Syria, saw a large influx of agricultural migrants and was one of the first sites of social unrest in the country. From there, the dominoes continued to fall, and Syria remains in the grip of a crisis that has overflowed its borders. WFP currently serves over 2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, along with another 5.8 million beneficiaries inside Syria.

The links between food insecurity and instability often produce spikes in migration. Food insecurity in Middle Eastern countries during the Arab Spring led to an increase in refugee flows and asylum seeking in Europe. WFP's own research into the causes of migration, based on data from 88 countries, found that a 1% increase in food insecurity fueled a 2% increase in migration. More recent surveys across Central America have produced similar results – a 1% increase in hunger leads to a 2% increase in migration.

The bottom line is that people do not stand idly by when they cannot feed themselves or their families. Already in the past month, we have seen social unrest triggered by food price spikes in Peru, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. This is likely just the beginning: the conditions for food-related instability today are far greater and the risks of social upheaval are much higher than they were a decade ago.

First, in 2008, the world was more stable than it is today. Several major conflicts have erupted since that time. The civil war in Ethiopia began in 2020, the Yemeni civil war in 2014, the Syrian civil war in 2011; while the conflict in Northeast Nigeria began in 2009 and in Central Sahel in 2017. Furthermore, we are experiencing exceptional, persistent droughts across the Horn of Africa, central Asia and the Dry Corridor, which have already created millions of additional migrants. The combination of conflict and drought has created fragility in multiple regions impacting hundreds of millions of people.

Second, the world has still not fully recovered from the ripple-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving it ill-equipped to cope with yet another crisis. In low- and middle-income countries especially, incomes are still depressed from COVID-19, labor markets are struggling to recover, and debt is at record levels. Governments around the world are less economically resilient and unable to respond with fiscal and monetary measures to help reduce the impacts of increasing food prices on their populations. With rising interest rates, the costs of credit further limit the options for governments to respond to these difficulties.

Third, city dwellers are facing increasing obstacles to accessing affordable food due to reductions in incomes and closures of informal markets, combined with price surges due to COVID-19 containment measures. While hunger has long been associated with rural areas, COVID-19 has created a growing class of hungry people: city dwellers in low- and middle-income countries. This matters as food price riots occur overwhelmingly amongst urban populations, particularly in relation to food products of cultural significance, and among countries with a strong reliance on agricultural imports. For example, Egypt, the most populous country in the Middle East and Ukraine's top wheat customer, will struggle to maintain existing subsidies on bread – a staple of the Egyptian diet – in the face of rising global wheat prices.

The combined effects of these factors, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, have created a perfect storm that threatens to unleash an unprecedented global wave of food insecurity and instability.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

A swift resolution to the crisis in Ukraine appears unlikely. Therefore, its global repercussions for food security and stability will become progressively more dangerous in the coming weeks and months. As humanitarian needs soar our ability to respond is diminishing due to the lack of funds. While global food supply chains are stressed, there are enough resources available in the world to feed everyone; the issue is one of cost and allocation. Because needs have outpaced funding, WFP is increasingly being confronted

with the impossible decision of who to support— and who not to support. We are being forced to decide who will live and who will die because we do not have the resources available to feed them.

Today you have the opportunity to decide whether or not to provide funds to help save the hungry. The costs of humanitarian *inaction* are tremendous, especially for people in need, who in the worst cases pay with their lives. Failing to mobilize sufficient, strategic, and timely funds for humanitarian assistance will not spare national budgets. Let me warn you clearly: if you do not respond now, we will see destabilization, mass starvation, and migration on an unprecedented scale, and at a far greater cost. A massive influx of refugees to Western countries could soon become a reality. As soon as they arrive, the host governments will start paying the price – literally –for not having acted earlier. Germany’s recent experience of absorbing Syrian refugees in the aftermath of the civil war is a case in point. It costs less than 50 cents to feed someone for a day in Syria versus almost \$70 a day in Germany to provide a refugee with the humanitarian support they require.

I therefore urge the members of this body to take decisive action to prevent a rapidly worsening global food crisis and help WFP and our partners stabilize the food security of the most fragile countries at this time of unprecedented need.

At a minimum, an additional five billion dollars for food assistance from the United States will provide WFP and other aid agencies with the support we need to stem the rising tide of famine. It will also send a very clear message to other donor nations that they must step up to do their part.

I do not look to the US to solve these problems alone, but I do ask that you show the humanitarian leadership the US is renowned for and which the world urgently needs right now. We are counting on you to lead with your actions as much as your words. As the Washington Post said in an editorial just 10 days ago, “Whether this precarious situation turns into a true global famine depends largely on what the United States, European Union, China and other large and wealthy nations do now [...] The United States and other major world powers have the ability to prevent a global famine. This is as urgent and morally necessary as sending tanks to Ukraine.”

###