

Testimony by José Andrés to the National Security Subcommittee
of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform

*Hearing on The U.S. and International Humanitarian Response
to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine
June 10th, 2022*

Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to share our experiences and insights with delivering humanitarian aid in and around Ukraine since the Russian invasion began. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for visiting the commercial kitchen World Central Kitchen built from scratch near the Polish border during the early days of the war.

World Central Kitchen, the non-profit I founded more than a decade ago, specializes in feeding communities after natural and man-made disasters. We are unique in how we work and the aid we provide.

We work with the fierce urgency of now, because when you are hungry or thirsty, you are hungry or thirsty today. Not tomorrow.

We believe in the power of food to rebuild lives, communities and jobs. A plate of food is a plate of hope. A dollar spent locally on feeding is a dollar that multiplies throughout the local economy.

There are people facing acute crises who are hungry for nourishment around the world. Aside from Ukraine and its border countries to the west, we have teams right now in Brazil, Bangladesh, and Mexico. And here in the United States, we are providing comforting meals and necessary groceries in Uvalde and East Buffalo.

Unlike other food aid organizations, we prepare and deliver hot meals, sandwiches and food packages because displaced people – or people struggling to survive conflict and catastrophe – often don't have the access, time or ability to cook for themselves in those moments.

Unlike other aid organizations, we rapidly build a networked model, organizing and supporting on-the-ground suppliers and kitchens. We buy local food. And we trust local people to feed local people, with their real-time intelligence, passion and expertise.

That's how Ukrainians are feeding Ukraine, with the support of World Central Kitchen.

Our Eastern Europe operation – which is currently entirely funded by private donations – is by far the largest feeding effort in the region.

We started serving hot meals one day after the war began, at the Poland-Ukraine border where refugees on foot were fleeing with whatever they could carry. We rapidly extended into Ukraine

and across all border crossings not controlled by Russia. I was there and talked to many refugees as I handed them a bowl of warm soup, often the first hot meal they had in almost a day.

When we showed up, there was no international humanitarian response. We instantly became the international humanitarian response, as we often are all over the world in the early days of a crisis.

At the peak of refugee flows across the borders, there was no real presence from the UN. We assumed the big guys would show up in a couple of days – but it took weeks for them to establish any sort of meaningful presence.

That's in response to the biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the civil war in Yugoslavia 30 years ago.

We witnessed countless children crossing the border alone, with no one to help them. We gave them a hot meal and connected them to volunteers. Because all they had was a phone number for their relatives.

Tens of millions of people, inside and outside Ukraine, desperately need our help.

Today, a week after the 100-day mark of this war, we have distributed more than 40 million meals to more than 475 cities in the region. We are working with almost 500 restaurants, food trucks, and caterers in 8 countries to distribute in shelters, border crossings, transit hubs, assistance centers. We have transported almost 20 million pounds of food to supplement the compromised food supply chain. We're providing food kits to recently liberated cities, to people who have been under siege, so they can also cook themselves. When you consider all the meals being cooked by WCK teams, our partners, and people at home – I believe we are almost doing a million meals a day.

The magnitude of this crisis requires a massive and sustained effort. We rely on more than 4,300 team members in Ukraine including more than 3,400 kitchen personnel, more than 240 warehouse workers, more than 210 logistics staff, and 70 railway coordinators.

There is still so much need and work to be done. And we need your help.

The United States Congress, on behalf of the American people, has been exceptionally generous through successive Ukraine funding bills, including most recently \$5 billion in humanitarian assistance. These funds are vital for Ukrainian people inside the country and across the region, as well as the people of countries around the world that rely on Ukraine's farmers for their own food supplies.

However, I must tell you that your work is not done. It is far from it. Dedicating money to this crisis is critical, but it is not enough. Not for American taxpayers and certainly not for the people of Ukraine.

There are structural reasons why established international aid groups took so long to have a presence in Ukraine. Those reasons will not change with billions of dollars.

We do not question the good intent of other aid groups. This is hard work and it is dangerous to operate in an active war zone.

We welcome anyone and everyone who has the expertise and ability to help the people of Ukraine.

But frankly that's not what we have witnessed on the ground. It gives me no pleasure to say that the United Nations, and the international community, need to do so much more for the amazing and brave people of Ukraine. We must also realize that helping Ukraine means helping the world—and the tens, if not hundreds, of millions of people who rely on their food exports like grain.

I recently was once again crossing the border into Ukraine and saw UNICEF and UNHCR tents for the first time. It was exciting to see their presence, but the tents were empty.

Pragmatism and on-the-ground actionable intelligence are sorely lacking in international aid. Large quantities of unwanted food are being delivered today with little regard for what the people of Ukraine can eat. There is only so much dried pasta a Ukrainian family will accept when they have no way to cook that pasta.

We have tried repeatedly to work with the World Food Programme, but the UN teams remained outside Ukraine for weeks and weeks instead of activating local teams inside the country.

With our boots on the ground, we know exactly where the need is. We talk to the community; we work with the community. We know where to send the food, and who is receiving the food. Every delivery is tracked, and we adjust to the needs we see.

Top-down organizations spending large amounts of money can seem to help, but it is vital to match what they are saying they are doing, with what people in need experience in real time – especially in the early days of a crisis.

I am a businessman, so I completely understand accounting for money spent. But the current system just does not work when people are starving and thirsty in a crisis. Food and water cannot wait. People are hungry and thirsty now. In the early days of a crisis, but even still now, we need a more agile and effective system to deliver aid.

That means reforming approval processes, cutting red tape, and rethinking contracting rules.

There are good reasons for these red tape rules to exist. But if the result is that aid does not flow, or it pays for unwanted aid, especially in the first weeks of a disaster or crisis, we need to ask ourselves the hard questions. This is a lesson we should have already learned. I hope you and your staffs will work with me and the team at WCK on legislative changes that can address these concerns, especially regarding the laws governing how USAID operates. USAID has an incredibly mission-dedicated staff. We believe they can be even more effective with some additional authorities and flexibilities to act much more quickly, as needed.

I will close with a reflection that not only changed my life, but also continues to drive me. My friend and mentor Robert Egger says that too often charity is about the redemption of the giver when it should be about the liberation of the receiver.

We can save lives, rebuild communities, and forge alliances that will keep our world safe and strong for generations to come.

But only if we adapt in how we think and operate. And only if we begin to reform the system of humanitarian aid. Let's please do that together with the urgency it requires. Only then shall the people who receive humanitarian aid experience the liberation they deserve.

Thank you for your time and attention, and for including me in this important hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you have.