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SAMARITAN'S PURSE

MARCH 28, 2017

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS,
AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Chairman Smith, esteemed Representatives, and fellow guests of this committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak here today on behalf of those suffering as a result of what has been called a “quiet famine” in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. As we sit here today, more than 20 million people are facing the terrifying reality of starvation. UNICEF has warned that over 1 million children are at imminent risk of dying from severe acute malnutrition, and over 6 million do not have enough food to meet their basic needs. My organization, Samaritan's Purse, is currently working to save as many lives as possible by feeding some 2 million people in Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda.

This complex and horrific humanitarian crisis is the result of many factors. Poor performance of crops because of lack of rain, increased food prices, disease outbreaks, deteriorating water and pasture conditions, and livestock death have all contributed to the catastrophe that is now before us. The most significant driver of the current crisis in the worst hit areas of South Sudan, however, is the political insecurity and brutal conflict that continues to engulf the region. In South Sudan alone, 1.85 million people have been internally displaced, leaving their homes—and crops—behind as they flee for their lives.

Because of this, many people are calling this a manmade famine, and it is hard to argue with that assessment. South Sudan is a nation with fertile soil, abundant water from the Nile River, and 12 hours of sunlight each day. It is also a country that has been embroiled in civil conflict since 2013, creating a swirling mass of people seeking safety and a way to meet their basic human needs such as food, water, and medicine.

The only way to save lives and reduce the suffering of these vulnerable populations is for the United States to provide sustained leadership in bringing immediate, large-scale food relief to the area.

To accomplish this, Food for Peace (FFP), the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), and the World Food Program (WFP) must be robustly funded. Let me be clear that what I am suggesting is not development programming. The effectiveness of this type of long-term intervention is still hotly debated. Instead, I am calling for immediate humanitarian assistance to save the lives of potentially millions of people who are now facing severe food insecurity.

Samaritan's Purse is working closely with FFP to distribute monthly food rations provided by WFP to nearly 1 million people in South Sudan. We also are partnering with OFDA in South Sudan and many other countries to provide clean water, agricultural support, and lifesaving nutritional support to vulnerable women and children, where over 100,000 people are currently experiencing famine conditions and another 1.46 million are expected to reach emergency levels of food insecurity. In the last six months of 2016, we distributed over 20,000 metric tons of food to nearly half a million people in South Sudan. In February of this year, we provided food to approximately 123,000 people in Mayendit, one area of South Sudan where famine has already been declared.

In Uganda, 1.5 million people are in a Phase 3 food crisis situation. This means that acute malnutrition levels are above normal levels and households are only marginally able to meet their minimum food needs. The influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing conflict in South Sudan and other areas is exacerbating this already highly insecure environment. In partnership with WFP, we are currently distributing food to tens of thousands of these refugees with plans to support the food needs of approximately 300,000 individuals in our upcoming distribution cycle.

We are grateful for the strategic partnerships with FFP and OFDA that have enabled us to bring critically needed humanitarian relief to hundreds of thousands of people at risk of starving to death. Unfortunately, it isn't nearly enough.

In addition to adequate resourcing of food and funding for FFP, OFDA, and WFP, consideration must be given for food aid reform that allows local purchase providing the necessary flexibility to buy food where it is most affordable and can be delivered as quickly as possible. In situations like the current food insecurity crisis gripping eastern Africa, we are in a race against time to save as many lives as possible. If more funds were made available for local purchase, food aid could be frequently bought at lower prices, and closer to the regions in need, than what can be grown and shipped from the United States. This may not always be the situation but the flexibility for these kinds of decisions will result in saving lives while stimulating local agricultural production.

This isn't just a matter of compassion. Food insecurity only brings further instability and insecurity to areas already plagued by conflict. When people are starving, governments are undermined, and the situation supports the brutality of the brutal.

Three weeks ago, Samaritan's Purse staff working in Mayendit were abducted by armed actors who threatened to kill them—an action directly connected to the famine conditions in that area. Thankfully, they were released safely, but the security conditions in the region remain highly unstable. In this environment of desperation and ongoing conflict, it is imperative that the United States and the world continue to support humanitarian assistance in order that millions of people do not die. Humanitarian assistance cannot fix political problems. There must be significant and ongoing political engagement to deal with the underlying cause of the instability. This means that we must be willing to work with weak governments, brutal governments, and strong-armed political

actors that are at the forefront of the current conflicts. These things are achieved through diplomatic and military channels

Does the United States have a responsibility, and an interest, to feed starving people in east Africa? I believe yes we do. It helps maintain security in the region and helps prevent the spread of radical extremism. It allows the United States to have more connectivity and influence in difficult places.

Nothing shows the heart and the compassion of the American people like helping others who are in desperate need. The United States has always led the world in both strength and compassion—even feeding our enemies at the end of conflicts. The world cannot ignore a famine or shirk the responsibility to attempt to save the lives of those at risk. We cannot turn our backs on innocent people, especially children, who are emaciated and weak, right now as we sit in this hearing.

Are we prepared to watch them die because we failed to act?