

Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations Subcommittee Hearing on  
Africa's Current and Potential Famines

Written testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global  
Human Rights, and International Organizations

United States House of Representatives

June 14, 2017

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this urgent and important topic.

As the Director of Humanitarian Practice at InterAction, I have a somewhat unique perspective on the current and potential famines taking place in Africa. InterAction is not an operational organization itself, but is an alliance of operational INGOs, many of whom are working to respond to each of these crises. In my role, I oversee several working groups focused upon ongoing humanitarian crises, including InterAction's Horn of Africa, Lake Chad Basin, and Sudan / South Sudan working groups. Earlier this year, InterAction stood up a Joint Famines Working Group in order to coordinate INGO information sharing and advocacy to facilitate humanitarian responses and address operational and funding challenges across Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen.

I have also seen the seeds of these crises on the ground. In the past 18 months, I undertook field visits to South Sudan, Nigeria, and Chad. I have seen the operational challenges my colleagues are facing first hand. My career before InterAction also saw field service in many African nations, including Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia – experience which has informed my observations of humanitarian operations today. I have also worked for years on forced displacement issues, including at the International Council of Voluntary Agencies.

### **Overview**

When considering global food insecurity, it bears repeating that we face an unprecedented crisis. Nearly 14 million people are in acute need of humanitarian assistance due to the threat of famine across northeast Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan, with that figure jumping to 20 million when including Yemen, the world's largest humanitarian crisis by number of people in need.<sup>1</sup> While these circumstances must be addressed, there are additional food insecurity crises on the continent, in Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, and Zimbabwe.

It is critical to underscore that when we speak of famine or the threat of famine, we are speaking of avoidable, man-made crises. Widespread food insecurity can also be the result of climatological events, such as drought, but in each context where we speak of famine conditions, the key factor is conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, June 2017.  
<http://www.fao.org/emergencies/resources/documents/resources-detail/en/c/854239/>

People are trapped in conflict, caught between state and non-state armed groups using hunger as a weapon of war and often inflicting deliberate harm on civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure. People forced to flee conflict have left their possessions behind, and fields and herds untended. Conflict interrupts livelihoods and severs support networks and coping mechanisms—impacts that disproportionately affect women and girls. These conflicts also take a toll on economies, with insecurity and rising inflation disrupting markets and impacting access to food and basic goods.

During a March hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the state of global humanitarian affairs, Yves Daccord of the International Committee of the Red Cross called for a “diplomatic surge” to address civilian protection by parties to conflict – state and non-state actors have a positive obligation to protect civilians in situations of armed conflict, but instead have put civilians in harm’s way and are instrumentalizing food aid with impunity. This call for urgent diplomacy is one that InterAction and I support. More broadly, without dialogue and negotiated solutions to conflict, including forceful diplomacy with all major actors across the affected regions, these humanitarian crises will persist – further devastating and destabilizing communities, and keeping millions in need of humanitarian aid.

When it comes to funding the response vis a vis humanitarian needs in each context, it is useful to look at the status of United Nations appeals for humanitarian funding as a proxy indicator. While these figures do not account for funding in the exact same way as the U.S. government, nor do they speak of operational challenges, they are a key in determining how much funding has made it into the field for the various responses.

- In Nigeria, an appeal of just over \$1 billion has only been 28% funded with \$102 million of that amount obligated by the U.S. government.<sup>2</sup>
- In Somalia, an appeal of just over \$1.5 billion has only been 36% funded with \$125 million of that amount obligated by the U.S. government.<sup>3</sup>
- In South Sudan, an appeal of \$1.64 billion has only been 47% funded with \$132 million of that amount obligated by the U.S. government.<sup>4</sup>
- The World Food Program’s (WFP) funding requirements for the crises in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen are only 27 percent funded, and in each context, there will be breaks in the supply pipeline without immediate funding.<sup>5</sup>

The humanitarian community appreciates the U.S. Government’s approval of \$990 million in emergency supplemental funding to respond to these famine and food insecurity crises. These funds have to be appropriated without delay if we are to avert further deterioration of an already dire situation. As part of the Office of Management and Budget’s report to Congress on the \$990 million mandated in the Fiscal Year 2017 Omnibus, Congress should demand the administration address impending breaks in the World Food Program (WFP) funding pipeline and ongoing shortages in overall humanitarian appeals in each context to enable the delivery of life-saving assistance to reach those most in need.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking System (FTS), accessed June 8, 2017. <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/536/summary>

<sup>3</sup> UN OCHA FTS, accessed June 8, 2017. <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/528/summary>

<sup>4</sup> UN OCHA FTS, accessed June 8, 2017. <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/538/summary>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations World Food Program, Fighting Famine Snapshot, May 30, 2017. <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ep/wfp292126.pdf>

I should also note my use of terminology related to the different levels of the Integrated Food Security Classification (IPC)<sup>6</sup> system – a set of tools and procedures to classify the nature and severity of food insecurity. While the definitions for each level are technical, effective shorthand is:

- IPC level 3 indicates severe food insecurity that requires urgent humanitarian response.
- IPC level 4 indicates severe food insecurity that has not seen an adequate response – by this stage, the effects of widespread malnutrition will have permanent effects, including increased deaths.
- IPC level 5 indicates full famine conditions – conditions have collapsed, starvation and death are widespread.

It is important to note that just because IPC5 has not been reached or officially verified in each context does not lessen the urgent need for humanitarian assistance. For example, anticipated reductions in verified IPC5 conditions in South Sudan have been counteracted by a large-scale spread of IPC4 conditions. Taken as a whole, conditions in South Sudan are actually worsening and needs are increasing.

### **Humanitarian Response**

Despite tremendous needs and ongoing geo-political challenges which require diplomatic solutions, humanitarian actors will continue to work tirelessly to provide life-saving assistance to vulnerable populations. Further support is necessary in a number of key areas to assist the staggering number of people in need due to famine conditions and the threat of famine in Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan.

#### *Humanitarian Access*

Access to those in need is vital for humanitarian actors, yet field staff face numerous obstacles while operating in these environments due to violence, insecurity, and bureaucratic impediments. Put simply, the challenge lies in reaching people where they are.

Concerns abound about possible violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which regulates the conduct of hostilities particularly around the protection of civilians and humanitarian aid workers, by all parties to conflict. Insecurity is a major challenge to humanitarian access, not just for NGO staff – who face considerable safety concerns – but also for affected populations suffering from increased protection threats and risk perpetrated by parties to the conflict.

In Nigeria, counter-insurgency operations against Boko Haram have forcibly displaced the civilian population from rural areas of Borno state. Other concerning actions include the intentional destruction of livelihoods, as well as arbitrary detentions, where the displaced are held in inhumane conditions in prisons, barracks, and camps closed to humanitarian actors.

In Somalia, the ongoing conflict in al-Shabaab held areas and widespread criminal activity are preventing civilians from reaching assistance. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) needs to improve its reporting of civilian casualties resulting from its operations, including addressing sexual violence. Additionally, donor risk protocols due to concerns about al-Shabaab are limiting NGOs' ability to deliver assistance in disputed areas.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fews.net/IPC>

In South Sudan, the conflict between government and opposition forces – particularly the campaign in southern Unity state – has created a famine. These operations continue to impact civilians trapped in the area, and impede access to the most affected communities. Using conflict insecurity to block access to front-line areas, the South Sudanese government prohibits access by humanitarians because it does not want humanitarian actors to report on conditions and possible human rights violations.

Physical access to the most vulnerable populations is constrained by violence and conflict in all three contexts. In Nigeria, the military dictates the areas where humanitarians can go. A grave concern is that the actual number of affected people is likely to be much higher once military operations conclude and populations are accessible. There must be negotiated access to northern Borno in order to provide access to populations believed to be in IPC5. The Nigerian military is a major contributor to abuses and secondary displacement. Humanitarian actors, not the military, need to be managing displacement camps to provide assistance directly to communities displaced by conflict. Assistance to communities that are hosting displaced persons must be independent of the government.

In Somalia, populations at the highest risk of IPC5 are in areas controlled by al-Shabaab or tribal actors outside of government control. While InterAction members have been working around these challenges using air bridges, UN Humanitarian Air Service flights, private traders, and rapid response operations to take advantage of short-window opportunities, true access has to be negotiated to reach these vulnerable people with basic humanitarian interventions. Assistance also needs to be provided at the community level, as people who can move are heading to urban areas. InterAction members report that internal displacement is occurring at higher rates than during the 2011 Somalia famine, when urban crowding led to disease outbreaks and localized conflicts.

In South Sudan, we have verified that there are people trapped in IPC5 conditions in southern Unity State. Negotiated access is essential to provide assistance to people currently in famine. Other regions in the country, such as northern Bahr El Ghazal and Upper Nile, also require scaled-up assistance to prevent further deterioration. The challenges are only exacerbated by the rainy season, during which time 90 percent of all roads in South Sudan become impassible, requiring more limited and costly delivery of relief by air.

Each of these three contexts is also marked by bureaucratic impediments where host governments are imposing obstacles on humanitarian actors and goods, obstructing and delaying much needed humanitarian responses.

In Nigeria, there are delays and restrictions on importing humanitarian supplies and movement of humanitarian staff. For example, the Nigerian government limits access to travel hubs in the northeast of the country. Furthermore, the Nigerian military controls delivery of assistance to IDP camps that have been closed to humanitarian actors.

In Somalia, there are challenges in reaching areas controlled by armed actors. This includes physical roadblocks and fee systems set up by both state security forces and al-Shabaab. This phenomenon also existed during the 2011 famine and imposed considerable impediments to the delivery of relief with devastating consequences for affected people. There are further issues with local and regional government structures, who may not know of or respect arrangements made with the weak central government in Mogadishu.

In South Sudan, the 2016 NGO Act has placed restrictions on NGO coordination and advocacy, placing significant burdens on NGOs operating in government-held areas, at times bringing operations to a near halt. NGOs have also faced recent challenges with work permit fees, slowdowns in visa processing, import licenses to bring goods into the country, and travel restrictions on NGOs seeking to access southern Unity state in the midst of famine conditions.

### *Displacement*

The ongoing conflicts and growing food insecurity in all three countries have forced people to move internally and across international borders. In many cases, people are unable to access basic services and reach aid.

In the heavily militarized response in Nigeria, civilians trying to access IDP camps face widespread arrests and detention. People fleeing rural areas controlled by Boko Haram are systematically detained and screened by security forces, often imprisoned without access to their families or to due process of law.

In Somalia, civilians in rural areas are unable to reach assistance. AMISOM needs to prioritize road-clearing – including removal of illegal roadblocks – instead of counter-offensives, in order to address further obstacles to populations attempting to reach humanitarian relief.

Each of these conflicts and food insecurity crises place enormous burdens on neighboring countries. Displacement from South Sudan has placed significant pressure on Uganda, which is currently the largest refugee host in the region with up to 1 million South Sudanese displaced into the country, and thousands more arriving daily; almost another million South Sudanese refugees seek safety in the broader region.<sup>7</sup> Somalia has seen over 700,000 people displaced by drought since November, with the number of refugees unclear due to halted registrations in Kenya.<sup>8</sup> Nigeria has seen over 2 million displaced, with over 200,000 refugees in neighboring countries.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond forced displacement, IDPs and refugees often face obstacles when registering to receive humanitarian assistance.

In Nigeria, IDPs face ongoing registration challenges in both traditional camp settings and non-camp environments. These problems are linked to systems of corruption, which include cycles of sexual exploitation and abuse. The government is also collecting assistance provided by humanitarian agencies, leaving vulnerable IDPs without access to assistance which the government reports has been received by affected people.

For displaced Somalis, suspension of new arrivals in Kenya has left tens of thousands without refugee status – even though they continue to arrive in Kenya. Without the ability to register, newly arriving Somalis in Kenya are left unable to access shelter and other humanitarian assistance. These registration issues also hinder analysis and understanding of needs inside Somalia, which poses an obstacle to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in its fundraising for programming in Kenya.

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<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20SSD%20Operational%20Update%20No%2010%20-%202016%20-31%20May%202017.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/57360.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Regional%20Update%20-%20Nigeria%20Situation%20-%20May%202017.pdf>

Forced returns are another problematic dimension in this displacement cycle, as the challenges continue even after refugees have been displaced and able to register. In some cases, people are being pushed to return from IDP and refugee camps with limited information and before situations in their home regions have stabilized, putting them at risk and hindering their access to humanitarian assistance.

In Nigeria, the Borno state government is pursuing forced returns by providing misleading information. In some cases, IDPs who agree to return have experienced secondary displacement.

Ongoing forced returns from Dadaab, Kenya to areas in IPC3 and 4 in Somalia continue despite assurances from the government of Kenya and UNHCR that the paid return program is voluntary. Returning refugees increase the humanitarian caseload as well as the pressure on urban population centers in Somalia, which in turn increases the risk for disease outbreaks and conflict triggers resulting from competition for access to limited services.

In South Sudan, IDPs continue to require protection in Protection of Civilian sites set up at UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) facilities. Proactive engagement is needed to address periodic calls to relieve pressure on POC sites by “encouraging” civilians to leave involuntarily and return to often insecure areas.

### *Programming*

Famine response is not simply about providing food and nutrition assistance. By the time famine is reached, people suffering from malnutrition have been weakened and made vulnerable to diseases and protection threats. Children under the age of five are most at risk. Therefore, humanitarian response needs to be holistic and include the direct provision of food, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health, and protection services.

Modalities such as cash have been a key element in the humanitarian response, and need to be adapted to contexts as appropriate, as seen in South Sudan where the collapse of markets actually limits the utility of cash modalities.

In Somalia, vitally important cash transfer programs funded by non-U.S. donors are ending without any follow-on funding. When combined with the previously mentioned break in the WFP pipeline, this will lead to further shortfalls that could counteract and undermine the effects of limited improvements in drought conditions.

In each context, we are witnessing increased vulnerability and protection concerns even outside situations of direct conflict. These concerns are particularly acute in the areas of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), where those in a position of vulnerability are subject to the predations of those in a position of power and authority, and forced recruitment.

In Nigeria, there is widespread exploitation of women and girls by the Nigerian military, the Civilian Joint Task Force, and civilian authorities around IDP camps. Examples of this abuse include demands for transactional sex for food or entry to IDP sites, and protection threats as women and girls leave IDP sites to collect fuel and water. Furthermore, there is a lack of basic services for women and girls, including those who have been subjected to SEA.

In Somalia, the combination of lack of livelihoods and increased household burdens on women and girls has led to negative coping strategies, including transactional sex and early marriage. There has been a

tremendous increase in documented cases of SEA, with 1,600 incidents reported during the months of January and February. Additionally, boys and young men are vulnerable to recruitment by armed actors.

In South Sudan, sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war, exacerbating the inability of people to meet their basic necessities, such as food, water, and fuel. Women are sent to gather these necessities despite the constant threat of sexual violence and abuse, because men and boys are simply killed by armed actors. Women and girls are also regularly attacked while gathering goods around POC sites, underscoring the need for increased and consistent foot and vehicle UNMISS patrols.

### *Funding*

Congress, with the personal support of the Chairman, Ranking Member, and other members of this Committee, provided \$990 million in order to respond to these alarming food security crises. But an appropriation is not enough. These funds must be allocated quickly and effectively in all three countries. The U.S. government must make firm pledges to get funding to beneficiaries before it's too late.

These humanitarian emergencies require adequate, timely, and flexible funding through a diversity of sources and modalities. The UN structures and agencies are vitally important in responding to these crises and need to continue to be robustly funded. However, rapid response necessitates direct funding to NGOs who are front-line responders.

U.S. funding is also necessary to leverage both traditional and non-traditional donors. Particularly in Somalia, there is an opportunity to engage with Gulf States and other Middle Eastern donors. The U.S. and UN recently hosted a donor mission for Middle East governments in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. This is a very encouraging action, and should be followed up vigorously by the U.S. government. But these donors will not be quick to respond if more traditional donors are slow to commit funding.

### **What can the United States Government do?**

Beyond diplomatic pressure to address on-going conflicts and civilian protection, there are a number of concrete actions the United States can take to meet immediate and urgent operational needs.

- The United States should support humanitarian actors as they negotiate physical access to the areas of greatest need.
  - Through diplomatic means, the U.S. should encourage parties to conflict to respect and address humanitarian access. Negotiated access makes it less likely that aid would be distributed by or even diverted to parties to conflict, and would reduce the use of costlier, less reliable work-arounds like air-drops and use of private traders.
  - This means giving humanitarian actors a clear and well-understood general license from the Treasury Department to operate in areas that may be controlled by sanctioned entities.
- The United States should use diplomatic levers to reduce bureaucratic impediments and get humanitarian actors and goods into the field in a timely and efficient manner.
  - The State Department should support relevant actors to grant expedited humanitarian visas and humanitarian imports into these countries.
  - Diplomatic support should be applied to remove obstacles from both national- and regional-level governments in the face of grave crises.

- The United States should use a variety of flexible funding mechanisms to facilitate a rapid, effective, coordinated, and comprehensive humanitarian response.
  - The traditional basic necessities for survival – food, shelter, water, and medicine – are essential, but not sufficient.
  - Protection, particularly against sexual and gender-based violence, SEA, and forced recruitment, should also be considered as part of a basic humanitarian intervention. Those who commit violations against these norms should be held accountable.
  - The United States should find opportunities to engage with development actors, including the World Bank, who can help rebuild these societies as these crises are ongoing – not just when the worst is over.
  - Direct funding of NGOs should be ramped up while continuing funding for UN agencies such as OCHA, UNHCR, WFP, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF).
- The United States should address issues around forcible displacement.
  - The State Department should support efforts to get governments to provide access to essential services and to stop arbitrary detention of populations who need those services.
  - The United States should work with governments in the region and the UN to ensure that those who have been displaced are able to register and reach assistance.
  - The United States should encourage governments in the region to ensure that returns are truly voluntary, safe, and dignified.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to address the operational challenges that humanitarian actors are experiencing in responding to these crises. I know that Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and other Members of this Committee and Congress have shown their deep commitment to this response. You have stepped up to fund the response. You have visited the affected regions. You have led a robust, American response. I hope my testimony is able to inform additional steps you can take to continue the leadership you’ve demonstrated to date in alleviating the suffering from hunger and malnutrition affecting millions across northeast Nigeria, South Sudan, and Somalia.