

At least 113 million worldwide living in food insecurity, conflict leading cause



United Nations, April 3 (RHC)-- A new report on famine around the world makes for grim reading, showing starvation ravaging 53 countries, mostly due to conflict and climate shocks. In some places, like Yemen, the crisis is almost entirely man-made.

"I can describe the horrors of what it was like to live under siege... but to describe how it feels to be hungry? On day one it is bad, and on day two you start to think: 'What can I do about this?' Beyond that I will not say," reads a quote from a Syrian refugee that opens the Food Security Information Network's latest Global Report on Food Crises.

Some 113 million people in 53 countries, the majority of them in Africa, faced chronic food shortages last year. Another 143 million people in 42 countries were found to be living in "[s]tressed conditions, on the cusp of acute hunger."

The growing problem is reflected in the increasing global spend on humanitarian aid, which rose from \$18.4 billion in 2013 to \$27.3 billion in 2017. Despite the rise in aid, the report's authors argue that "humanitarian assistance does not address the root causes of food crises."

The worst food crises in 2018, in the order of severity, were in Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan and Nigeria, affecting over 72 million people in total.

Drought, floods, and other climate shocks are one of the causes, driving 29 million people into acute food insecurity last year. A drought in Afghanistan dropped food production to its lowest level since 2011, while dry weather hammered agricultural output in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Adverse weather conditions coupled with economic shocks were also responsible for much misery in Africa and South America.

Economic troubles were to blame for the starvation of another 10.8 million people, mainly in Burundi, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Conflict, however, was the key driver of misery and famine worldwide, plunging 74 million people into food insecurity around the world, almost half of them -- 33 million -- in ten African countries. Nowhere was this more evident than in war-torn Yemen, the worst-hit country of 2018.

More than half of Yemen's population was in "urgent need" of humanitarian assistance late last year, with two million children under five acutely malnourished. Only 15 percent of children there received the minimum acceptable diet for growth and development.

The "man-made humanitarian catastrophe" in Yemen has even driven desperate parents to sell their daughters for food, according to an Oxfam director.

Yemen's civil war, ongoing since 2015, pits Iranian-backed Houthi rebels against the government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Hadi is supported by a coalition of Arab and Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which is backed by U.S. intelligence and logistical support. The coalition bombing campaign has left almost 18,000 civilians dead, according to the Yemen Data Project.

Western powers have come under increasing pressure to halt weapons sales to Saudi Arabia in light of the mounting death toll, with the targeting of a bus full of schoolchildren last August triggering an international outcry.

The Saudi land, sea, and air blockade of Yemen has resulted in shortages of food, medicine, and clean water in what is already the Arab world's poorest country.

Rather than throwing more aid at the problem, the report recommends fighting hunger at its cause. Its authors welcomed the UN Security Council's adoption of Resolution 2417 last May, which allows the council to sanction parties that use starvation as a weapon of war.

Although the UN has not yet sanctioned Saudi Arabia for its role in Yemen's humanitarian crisis, the U.S. Senate voted last month to block further American involvement in the war. U.S. President Donald Trump, however, has vowed to veto the bill.

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