

“The Four Famines”: Root Causes and a Multilateral Action Plan
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development, Multilateral Institutions, and
International Economic, Energy, and Environmental Policy

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Testimony of
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Chairman Young, Ranking Member Merkley, distinguished Subcommittee members,

Thank you for inviting the ICRC back to Capitol Hill to update you on the humanitarian situation in each of these four contexts, and to recommend concrete and actionable next steps for the US Government and the wider international community. We will do so with general recommendations across the four countries and specific country recommendations.

1. Main Messages

Our message to you today is firstly one of thanks. The ICRC is extremely grateful to this Committee and to the US Government for taking this crisis so seriously and responding to it early. US leadership has helped to turn the tide of famine and US support remains mission critical to the success of ICRC operations in each country. American values and American money are saving hundreds of thousands of human lives in Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Northern Nigeria.

Early action across all four countries in the last four months means that a major food emergency like the one in Somalia of 2011 has been avoided. Our operations on the ground – often in hard to reach areas – confirms the general view that terrible famines have been averted but food insecurity remains extremely high. Progress has been uneven and survival for many people is not certain. The cholera epidemic in Yemen is a major reversal affecting hundreds of thousands of people. Cholera’s reappearance as endemic in Somali and South Sudan is also serious cause for concern.

Armed conflict and climate are still the drivers of these crises and create a terrible double vulnerability for people. In March, when we addressed the full Committee, we asked you for a “diplomatic surge”. We thank the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for the letter its members wrote to the Secretary of State on 23 March 2017 underscoring the urgent need for such a surge. This certainly helped galvanize attention. In turn, we committed to scale-up our operations.

Today we are asking the US Government and others for a **“protection surge” to improve the behaviour of the parties to conflict in these countries and enable a major push for people’s safe access to livelihoods and services**. Without this, people’s lives will still hang in the balance.

We urge your Subcommittee and the US Government to focus on four survival imperatives for people in the next phase of this crisis.

- **Improve the conduct of hostilities**

Failures to respect International Humanitarian Law (IHL) continue to be a major cause of human suffering. All parties to conflict must ensure that civilians and civilian objects are protected against the effect of hostilities. This is often not happening and the consequence of violence, destruction, displacement and restricted movement is impoverishment, destitution, disease and death.

This situation can and must be changed by political, legal and military policies that insist on greater respect of IHL and create a new environment in which millions of people can return home safely and recover their own means of survival.

We ask your Subcommittee and the US Government to do everything in your power to bring about a change in the way these wars are fought to ensure greater respect for IHL and secure broad based protection for the civilian population in all four countries.

- **Invest in health and water services**

Most people die from infectious diseases in food emergencies. Cholera, measles and respiratory infections are the deadly accomplices of hunger and destitution. People's health must remain a major priority. People need IV fluids and medicines now but they also need functioning health and water services to keep them healthy throughout these protracted conflicts. We ask the US Government to hold its course and be a strategic investor in health and water services.

- **Support rural livelihoods and reinvigorate urban markets**

The last four months confirm that the US and other governments must focus their aid simultaneously on short and long-term livelihood needs to ensure people's means of survival. The challenge is resilience. People need food now and they need land, seeds and safe access to plant and harvest for the future. People need cash transfers now but they also need markets, imports and safe and open trading routes.

The US Government must continue to meet immediate needs but also develop its humanitarian policy to meet people's deeper survival needs in these four countries. We ask you to continue to support humanitarian aid in each country and deepen your strategy to give people a hand-up by enabling their safe access to livelihoods and services.

- **Enable flexible multiyear funding**

This short-long strategy requires flexible funding to respond to people's different needs across the humanitarian-development nexus. Investing in health and water services, and in rural and urban livelihood regeneration requires multiyear planning and financing.

Budgets also need geographical flexibility. These four countries sit within wider regional conflict and climate systems. People regularly move across borders to survive. New crises flare up in different countries. Funding should be free to follow people's needs across the region, and not be trapped in single States.

2. Situation Overview

It has been four months since we last addressed you. During this time there has been important progress and regrettable reversals.

Early action has so far averted a terrible famine. Timely funding from the US Government and others has enabled the ICRC to scale-up in all four countries. We have been able to expand our humanitarian action in food security, water and health.

For example, in Somalia, working closely with the Somalia Red Crescent, we have reached 178,032 people with food and 263,116 people with cash since January. Our health support means 170,222 people have been treated in health facilities and 25,472 malnourished children have had special feeding. In hard to reach parts of Nigeria, we have provided 405,000 people with food and 20,000 with cash.

This is a lot of human life saved because of timely funding. The capacity to scale-up fast has kept us one step ahead of famine in each country. People are suffering deeply but they are not dying *en masse*. Humanitarian aid is working.

During these four months we have also seen major new reversals. At a time when global development policy is focused on a 2030 Agenda, health indicators in large parts of these four countries are more like 1830 than 2030. There is a dramatic deterioration in health because of cholera in three of the four countries. Cholera is still spreading fast in Yemen and is endemic in South Sudan and Somalia too.

The surge in funding since March has helped us to scale up in Yemen. We have been able to support 17 health facilities in difficult areas and treated 60,000 people with cholera – some 19% of all cases. We have also been able to ensure safe water for 2.23 million people in seven towns and cities. The spread of disease in and from prisons remains a serious concern. We have carried out deep cleaning in several prisons.

Animal health has deteriorated too. Livestock are dying in very large numbers even if people are not. Pastoralists have lost 70% of their livestock in Somalia which will take five years to replace. Rural livelihoods are being devastated by drought, insecurity, displacement and impoverishment. New and repeated displacement keeps happening because of drought and new cycles of violence. Rapid unplanned urbanization is taking place in Nigeria and Somalia. Urban centres are often overwhelmed by people who are internally displaced (IDPs) and by high levels of destitution and disease.

In short, people are alive but greatly weakened. Millions are cut off from their homes, jobs and livelihoods – dependent on humanitarian aid and the generosity of host families. Humanitarian aid is working and must continue but this crisis runs deep.

The Same Root Causes

There is, we regret, no major progress on the twin causes of these four crises: armed conflict and climate risk. People in each country remain the victims of an extreme “double vulnerability” to the simultaneous effects of armed conflict and climate.

Patterns of conflict and the conduct of hostilities continue to be the single biggest factor shaping people’s suffering and limiting the options for humanitarian response. The way wars are being fought in each country leads to repeated forced displacement, destruction of civilian objects, scorched earth policies, restricted movement, looting and pillage. This continues to destroy people’s assets and livelihoods, and their access to basic health and education services on which they depend.

Cruel patterns of gender based violence see many women and girls (and men and boys) become victims of horrific acts of sexual violence and abuse – nearly always perpetrated by men. Men and boys disproportionately face high levels of forced conscription and severe conditions in detention. Girls and boys may also be victims of abduction and exploitation.

Extreme and volatile climate – the second cause – is also putting great pressures on people. This, too, is responsible for livelihood collapse and asset depletion. There has been some rain but not enough. Drought continues to destroy crops or means they are never planted. Livestock – cattle, goats and sheep - have died in huge numbers or been sold off cheap in distress selling across all four countries.

Our Red Cross and Red Crescent Climate Centre – based between The Hague and Boston – analyses climate data in humanitarian crises. They report the following on Somalia:

“In some parts rainfall from September to December 2016 was extremely scarce – the kind of drought expected once in a hundred years. Elsewhere, the rains were scarce but not extremely so – a drought expected every 15 years – not enough to cause extensive food insecurity on its own but tipping people into disaster when added to conflict. We are deeply concerned about the future for communities in conflict areas where climate shocks and changing rainfall and temperature conditions will make conditions worse, and where violence destroys natural resources and infrastructure to make people even more vulnerable to climate risk”.

The double vulnerability of people in each one of these four countries leaves little room for traditional coping mechanisms which have often collapsed in the double squeeze from conflict and climate.

A Deeper Approach to Protection and Livelihoods

The safety-net function of aid is still profoundly important in each country where peace may not be quick. Humanitarian aid must continue to go to scale so that it can reach people as they become sick, deprived of their livelihoods and continuously displaced in these protracted crises. But aid policy must not only think about supplying food, water and medicine. A major push on safe access to livelihoods and health services is fundamental to maintain the level of success that has already been achieved.

What people need most is peace. If they cannot have peace then the US and others must use their influence and their role in military coalitions to improve the conduct of hostilities by all parties to conflict so that people are better protected and have safe access to their land, their businesses and basic services.

The daily challenge in each country remains access: people's safe access to the land, resources, markets and health services they need to survive and thrive, and access by local authorities and humanitarian agencies to maintain the basic services which people need.

Focusing on people's access to survival resources will move humanitarian policy beyond ensuring people's *immediate survival* to helping them recover *the means of survival*. This shift is essential in all four countries where conflict and food insecurity look set to continue.

This next phase approach means thinking about people's safety and dignity beyond humanitarian camps and the generosity of host families. It means safe planting and harvesting; safe grazing and well-timed livestock replenishment; small business development; the protection and effective supply of water and health care facilities, and important efforts to ensure the protection and continuity of education for children whose life chances will be greatly reduced without school.

3. Updates on Each Country

The Subcommittee also asked for short updates and actionable next steps on each country.

Yemen

The resilience of ordinary Yemenis is not at breaking point – it has been broken. Today 1% of the population has contracted cholera - 320,199 people to date. This will rise to half a million very sick people, more if it rains. 1742 people have died from the disease.

The health system has collapsed. Only 45% of health facilities are functioning. Most have been stopped by a combination of attacks and a lack of power and supplies. The situation is getting worse by the day. Thanks to urgent humanitarian aid and the dedication of Yemeni health workers, many unpaid for 10 months, the death rates in the cholera epidemic have not been dramatically higher. IV fluids are saving lives and we need to import a further 400,000 liters now.

In the capital of Sana'a and other cities, the average citizen can no longer afford clean water, basic hygiene and electricity. Nor can they afford basic commodities and lifesaving drugs. Without ICRC and other organizations support for dialysis and insulin, thousands of people with chronic diseases would die from diabetes and kidney failure.

War creates and shapes the suffering in Yemen. Conflict is the ultimate cause of cholera, hunger, the collapse of basic services and widespread impoverishment. The ICRC is relieved that there has been no direct attack on Hodeida port. This would have had an even more catastrophic effect on the humanitarian situation.

All those who play a part in this conflict directly, or in support, bear a share of responsibility for this catastrophe and must act fast to improve conditions.

Humanitarian aid alone cannot cope and hold back Yemen's near total collapse. It is impossible to bridge the gap between the exponentially growing needs of Yemenis and humanitarian response. We will keep trying night and day to reach as many people as we can. We need US Government support for three practical measures:

- Ensure that goods, which are essential to the survival of the civilian population, are allowed into and across Yemen. This applies not only to food but also to other basic commodities needed by the civilian population like drugs and soap.
- Every effort must be made urgently to mobilize all countries of influence around the conflict to ensure that IHL is better respected across the multiple divides and fault lines in Yemen, in the region and beyond. Collective responsibility should be taken by all parties concerned in the conflict to ensure greater respect for one another and for the Yemeni population in such extreme need.
- It is high time to get the political process back on track.

The US has an important role to play in Yemen beyond its direct contribution to humanitarian aid and can exert positive influence on each of these measures.

Somalia

There has been progress in Somalia. International response in Somalia has been earlier and quicker than in 2011. This has prevented the worst. Some rain has given limited relief to pastoralists and farmers but it is not enough yet to launch a recovery. We have been able to scale-up effectively and work widely across Somalia in places under the control of different parties to the conflict. Lessons learnt from 2011 are in place. There is a more engaged donor community, a more joined-up reading of the situation and a strong system to scale-up cash programming.

But the situation remains precarious. The conflict is still dynamic. The armed opposition is agile and strong, and a major offensive is building up from the government side. The level of violence remains high and continues to impact the civilian population. Widespread displacement and very high levels of livestock death means destitution for millions of

Somalis. Cholera is endemic and taking hold. We have helped treat 7,000 cholera patients to date. Food insecurity and destitution means that disease may kill people before starvation.

We suggest the following next steps:

- Development actors need to be more involved to support basic services and infrastructure. Recent World Bank engagement is a very positive step.
- IDPs in and around urban areas will need continued support because rains are not yet sufficient for them to return home.

South Sudan

It is harder to report progress in South Sudan. The immediate risk of famine has been averted in Unity State by the humanitarian assistance that has been delivered since March. This is good news. But the new violence in Equatoria Region has created a major exodus of people fleeing the “bread basket” of South Sudan with major knock-on effects for food insecurity and deepening crisis. Productive land is abandoned leaving crops unattended and the August harvest is grim because farmers have fled.

The conflict is still entrenched in repeated rounds of violence in many parts of the country. The security situation for millions of people is deteriorating, and shifting front lines since March have generated new displaced people, especially in Jongley and Upper Nile where people have fled deep into opposition territory. Violence has also caused massive forced displacement into neighbouring countries since we briefed you last. People who have stayed in their homes are fearful and need protection.

Recurring violence and displacement makes it impossible for people to settle, plant and recover. Many are still on the run and hiding in marshes, essentially destitute. And cholera is endemic in South Sudan too. Cholera continues to spread at the same time as access to adequate sanitation and health care has been severely reduced because of the ongoing fighting. A major epidemic across the country would be extremely hard to control and could see much higher mortality rates than in Yemen – not least because health facilities have been routinely destroyed and looted in recent years.

As we meet, South Sudan is in the middle of its annual lean season which makes people’s condition more precarious still. We may see a slight upturn with the coming harvest but food aid will remain a priority, and we are still delivering 65% of our assistance by air which is extremely costly. We recommend four practical measures:

- Food aid must be continued during the lean season and beyond.
- The pattern of violence must stop or conform to greater respect for IHL if vulnerable people stand a chance of recovering their livelihoods and accessing health services.
- Health services and water systems must be protected and health access must increase to prepare for a cholera epidemic.

- Deadlock on the political process to stop and resolve the conflict needs to be broken.

Nigeria

In Northern Nigeria, humanitarian aid has increased since March but so too have needs. The region's two million IDPs have often been repeatedly displaced and their 1.5 million hosts are in an increasingly precarious condition. But humanitarian aid, including our own into the most hard to reach areas like Mobbar, Kukawa and Kala Balge, has taken the worst off the situation although we remain in no doubt that the risk of severe food insecurity persists.

Conflict continues through hit-and-run attacks which keep people fearful and displaced. In Nigeria, too, conflict is stopping people from planting, harvesting and returning home. Security measures designed by State authorities often contribute to people's confinement and isolate them further from their land and livelihoods, and from health and education services. This is hindering child vaccinations and the early treatment of malnutrition. Access to health services is increasing and this needs to be sustained.

Security restrictions on crop types and fertilizers also limit cultivation. If some of these restrictions could be eased, people could be more easily supported to recover the livelihoods and access to services. We have already registered 180,000 farmers for agricultural inputs.

We suggest the following next steps:

- Ease import restrictions for food aid and agricultural inputs until local purchase procedure is cheaper and speeded up. Local procurement is slow and twice the cost.
- Ease restrictions on the affected civilian population to give them more access to farming fields, markets, health care and education services.

Finally

Thank you for giving the ICRC this second opportunity to address the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The ICRC relies on the generous support of the American people.

American aid and compassion are saving hundreds of thousands of lives across these four countries. We ask you to continue to do this, and to go further. We ask you to use America's humanitarian influence to create a more protective environment for the civilian population, and we ask you to invest American money more deeply in programs that help people recover their health, their livelihoods and their homes.

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