



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
Armed Conflict, Starvation, and International Humanitarian Law

Tuesday, April 12, 2022

2:00 –3:30 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Rep. Chris Smith

Excerpt of Remarks

Thank you, Co-Chair McGovern, for your opening remarks, and for convening today's hearing on starvation as a weapon of war.

As we speak, Vladimir Putin's troops are waging war against civilians in Ukraine, but the consequences of this heinous barbarity will extend beyond Ukraine in this interdependent and interrelated world we live in.

Together, Russia and Ukraine supply [more than a quarter](#) of the world's wheat.

Thus the consequences are already being felt in disrupted supply-chains, food shortages, price hikes, and political discontent in countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and likely to spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, to

regions whose agricultural sectors already have been impacted by COVID-19 and African Desert Locusts.

Throughout history, politics and policies have exacerbated unexpected and irregular famines, such as the 1845 to 1852 [Irish Potato Famine](#), caused by a strain of [P. infestans](#).

Other famines, however, are engineered, orchestrated by the vilest of actors engaging in armed conflict or punishing their own people, whom they deem enemies of the State, or ideological class enemies.

Thus to contextualize this hearing, it is important to have an historical perspective and an understanding of the role of ideology.

Indeed, starvation as a weapon of mass destruction is not unknown to Ukraine.

From 1932 to 1933, then-Soviet Ukraine suffered a horrific famine, known as the “*Holodomor*,” words meaning “starvation” and “to inflict death” in Ukrainian, directed by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

This famine left an estimated of at least [3.9 million dead](#), with most of its victims accruing in the spring of 1933.

Under the policy of [collectivization](#) that began in 1929, Stalin and the Soviets seized ownership of individual land to create collective farms, while deporting [kulaks](#), relatively rich peasants who were designated a class enemy. Those that resisted had their homes ransacked for food, with their families

blacklisted from receiving sustenance from sources outside their villages. Meanwhile the State set extreme grain procurement quotas and rejected international aid.

This was famine-enabled genocide; the USSR secured [4.27 million tons of grain](#) from Ukraine in 1932, which was more than enough to feed [10 million people](#), yet Ukrainians starved to death.

The Kremlin's methodological assault on Ukraine echoes other man-made famines, like the Great Chinese Famine between 1959 and 1961 under Chairman Mao Zedong, where at least 30 million men, women and children starved to death.

There, in the face of a drought, the Chinese Communist Party launched its second five-year plan, called the [Great Leap Forward](#), which abolished private plot farming, and transferred all production, allocation, and distribution of food to the hands of the State.

Ignoring the collectivization failure of the USSR and wishing to manufacture an industrial revolution from scratch, Mao forced farmers to work on communes and meet unrealistic grain quotas while requiring peasants to mine and smelt steel in backyard furnaces. In addition to death by starvation in the greatest [non-wartime famine](#) in history, so-called "rightists" and "weak links" were executed as well.

Meanwhile, Chairman Mao not only acknowledged but [mocked the crisis](#): "When there is not enough to eat people

starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill.”

Letting class enemies starve is thus an all-too-common ideological weapon of Communist regimes.

North Korea also weaponizes hunger as a way to systematically control its population. This is evident in the longstanding system of state-sponsored discrimination called the "Songbun" system.

"Songbun" – a Korean term that encompasses the political, social, and economic background of one's direct ancestors as well as the social behavior of one's relatives – is used to determine whether an individual is to be trusted with responsibilities, or even to receive an adequate supply of food.

This is one reason why international efforts to reach the food-needy in North Korea have been often thwarted by Pyongyang's diversion of international humanitarian food aid to its military and the social elites, accounting for malnutrition among the general population.

In Ethiopia, food has and is utilized as a weapon of war.

From 1983 to 1985, the Communist Derg starved people in Tigray, leading to an estimated 1 million famine deaths. The famine in Tigray was orchestrated by destroying civilian lives, food production capacities, commerce, and forced resettlement. During the 1984 famine, senior Derg officials stated that “to kill

the fish, you drain the water” to justify its policy of mass starvation.

Today, we see the history repeating itself, sadly.

Ethiopian government and Eritreans forces in Tigray are alleged to be using starvation as a weapon of war, with [700,000 people](#) living in acute food insecure conditions amid [2.2 million](#) people internally displaced. In this seesawing conflict, both government forces and those affiliated with the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front have been accused of restricting relief to those in need.

Thus, today’s hearing is necessary. In a world beset by conflict, the weaponization of hunger and inflicting death by starvation is heinous beyond imagination.

I look forward to your testimony.