

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing On Armed Conflict, Starvation and International Humanitarian Law

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Cisco, Via WebEx

Statement of Jocelyn Brown Hall

Director

FAO North America

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on such a timely yet, unfortunately, evergreen issue of conflict-driven hunger. I am honored to represent the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations or “FAO”, in my capacity as Director of our North American operations.

For those of you who are unfamiliar, FAO is the world’s leading technical agency for food and agriculture; we are tasked with achieving zero hunger through creating resilient and sustainable agri-food systems. We have 195 members and are stationed in over 130 countries, including many of the crisis-stricken countries we will talk about today, such as: Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ukraine.

We like to think of ourselves as the “USDA for the world” because our work varies from normative research and standard setting on trade and food prices, to farmer field training programs, to crisis prevention and emergency agricultural assistance.

FAO was founded in the wake of World War 2 to address novel widespread food insecurity and broken food systems. Dealing with conflict-related hunger crises and their aftermath have been at the heart of our work since day one.

As we are all aware, armed conflict is not the sole driver of hunger crises in our world today. The COVID-19 pandemic, its related supply chain issues and economic fallout, along with worsening climate change and extreme weather have all exacerbated the state of world hunger. With the

highest food prices in over 40 years, the number of hungry people will continue to climb, especially in areas experiencing instability and conflict.

In Ukraine alone, where FAO has a staff of 81, there are 18 million food-insecure citizens right now. What is, arguably, even more jarring is that there is no end in sight and this may only be the beginning, as the invasion rages on. While communities are destroyed and supply lines cut, long-term repercussions are arising due to crop destruction, military conscription of farmers, and insecurity about whether crops can be harvested.

This conflict's effects stretch past Ukraine, plunging Yemen and Somalia further into food crises, as they had been reliant on Ukraine and Russia's agricultural output. Now, as FAO reported recently, Yemen's already dire hunger crisis is teetering on the edge of outright catastrophe, with 17.4 million people now in need of food assistance.

While we in FAO can't solve the conflicts themselves, we can help build stronger agricultural systems able to withstand conflict-related shocks that lead to hunger and starvation. We need to work towards increased efficiency and resiliency in domestic agricultural production and markets before, during, and after a conflict.

While this might sound like a tall order, the good news is that pre-disaster resilience-building is more cost-efficient and has a track record of success: FAO, with the help of our partners was able to prevent a devastating famine by using disaster prevention technology to avert food insecurity in 37 million people across the already-embattled regions of the Horn of Africa and Yemen. In Afghanistan, \$160 wheat seed kits will feed a family of seven for six months – whereas, direct food assistance would typically cost around \$1,200. The benefits are not only financial, but are lasting and far-reaching, yielding more economic empowerment and upward mobility, especially for women and those in positions of vulnerability.

By bringing attention to the complex nature and roots of food insecurity, through hearings such as we are having today, we are taking an important step in the management and prevention of hunger crises. However, in order to implement this crucial work, we also need to properly allocate resources, which is where Congress can help.

We recommend that, first and foremost, the US government begins to treat agricultural assistance as a solution to hunger crises, not an afterthought. We need to understand that, while reactive food assistance during crises is absolutely necessary – it is not nearly sufficient on its own. We are putting a band-aid on a problem that instead requires long-term care and medicine.

We also need your voices to promote the continuation of international trade. Enacting import and export restrictions will raise prices and further stagger food supplies. In addition, to protect the nutritional status of vulnerable groups, it is essential that Congress helps to preserve social safety net programs and pair with agricultural production support, whenever possible.

Above all, we ask that Congress proactively and consistently funds the mechanisms that prevent future hunger and starvation. We need to invest in humanitarian aid – primarily through fully funding the Humanitarian Response Plan, which most recently was only funded at 39% - and recognize agriculture as a key component of this humanitarian aid. While this is a shared

responsibility by UN member states, is worth noting that \$550 million of FAO's emergency global appeal also remains unfunded. The current moment an inflection point for food insecurity and an unmissable opportunity for the United States to show strong leadership in preventing and mitigating hunger.

Thank you again for this opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.