



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Armed Conflict, Starvation and International Humanitarian Law

Tuesday, April 12, 2022

2:00 – 3:30 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us for today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on armed conflict, starvation and international humanitarian law.

I have been an anti-hunger advocate for a long time. I know that when people hear the word 'hunger', often what comes to mind is some kind of scarcity or lack of food that's due to factors beyond our control.

But most of the time that's not the case. Hunger is a political condition – it is due to choices that human beings, often times leaders of various countries, make.

One of those choices is about how to conduct war.

Last December the U.N. World Food Program [reported](#) that 811 million people were facing hunger, of whom almost 60 percent lived in areas affected by armed violence.

In January the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, along with WFP, released their [February to May 2022 outlook](#) on global "Hunger Hotspots." They reported that food insecurity would likely get worse in 20 countries. The most acute situations include Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen, all of which are experiencing armed conflict.

Conflict is not the only cause of hunger. But it is a main driver in 8 out of 10 of the worst hunger crises in the world today.

This was already the case before Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine, a main supplier of wheat to Africa and the Middle East.

I want to emphasize that we're not talking about "collateral damage." We're talking about intentional decisions to wage war in ways that directly or indirectly undermine people's access to food and put them at risk for starvation.

This happened in Syria when civilians were trapped in besieged cities.

It is happening in Ethiopia as people are systematically denied access to humanitarian relief.

And it happened in Burma, where destruction of farmland and villages along with restrictions on movement were used against the Rohingya.

The link between conflict and hunger and starvation is well-known.

Four years ago the U.N. Security Council [adopted resolution 2417](#) that explicitly recognized the link between armed conflict, food insecurity and famine, and recalled that international humanitarian law prohibits the use of hunger as a weapon.

In fact, to intentionally cause starvation of civilians is a war crime, a violation of both the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute.

When people hear the words "war crime," starving civilians is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. We're more likely to think about the bombing of whole cities, the destruction of medical facilities, killing civilians in cold blood – the kinds of images we're seeing come out of Ukraine as we speak.

And that is why I wanted to hold this hearing today. We need to shift our thinking about hunger and starvation when these are linked to armed conflict.

We should not assume hunger is somehow a "natural" consequence of war.

We should be asking whether it's the result of intentional decisions that make it a war crime.

And if investigations show a war crime, we should be insisting on accountability for those responsible.

As we'll hear today, there are truly important efforts underway to develop ways to do that.

The issue has even found its way into a court case here in the United States.

A month ago, a federal court in Virginia [ruled](#) that a civil claim for damages could proceed against Libyan warlord General Khalifa Haftar who is accused of [war crimes including starvation sieges](#).

Let me be clear that seeking accountability for those who purposefully cause starvation is not in any way a substitute for providing desperately needed humanitarian assistance to hunger hotspots.

On the contrary, providing humanitarian assistance is a way to support the victims of war crimes, and the U.S. has been a strong leader on this front.

But even as humanitarian agencies like FAO and WFP respond to existing hunger crises, we need attention to prevention as well. That means strategies to build resilience like those we'll hear about from FAO in a few minutes.

What I'm calling for is an approach in which humanitarian assistance and the building of resilience go hand-in-hand with accountability.

I urge House Members who share this concern to cosponsor H. Res. 922, a bipartisan resolution led by Congresswoman Sarah Jacobs who is a member of the Human Rights Commission. The resolution condemns the use of hunger as a weapon of war and calls for sanctions against those responsible. I think this would be a first step towards accountability.

I want to say thank you to all of our witnesses.

Before I turn to our first witness, I want to yield to the distinguished co-chair of the Commission, Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey.