

Syria's Humanitarian Crisis: What More Can We Do?

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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Statement of Richard Leach, President and CEO of the World Food Program USA

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Pitts, members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, thank you for convening this hearing on the Syrian humanitarian crisis.

Today I will provide evidence of the successes achieved so far in reaching millions of Syrians with humanitarian food assistance and the obstacles that exist in reaching even more vulnerable families. I will then offer recommendations for an improved U.S. and international response to the unprecedented scale of humanitarian crises worldwide.

As you know, the World Food Programme has a long history of success in fighting hunger and food insecurity on a global scale. The Syrian Crisis offers no exception. WFP operations reach millions of conflict-affected Syrians both within and outside the country's borders.

Inside Syria, WFP and its partner organizations reach over 4 million people each month with life-saving food assistance across 13 of the 14 governorates in the country. Over a quarter of this assistance is delivered to people living in hard-to-reach, high conflict areas. In fact, in the first eight months of 2016, WFP reached 1.3 million people in besieged areas, including 189,500 in rural Damascus and Homs as well as 850,000 in Idleb, Aleppo, Hama, and Dar'a governorates. Food is directed to Syria using sophisticated supply chains and reaches those in need through a variety of delivery methods—trucks, airdrops, and even cranes in some cases. WFP has conducted nearly 200 airdrops in the besieged regions of Northeastern Syria, for example, providing almost

5,000 MT of food to those otherwise unreachable via land. These airdrops are a tool of last resort—they are expensive and dangerous.

Many of the people displaced in Syria are children, some of whom have never known peace. WFP is investing in this next generation—the generation that will rebuild Syria— by providing healthy food to children through school meals and support to nursing mothers. Through these efforts WFP reaches almost 200,000 children in the country each month with nutrition products to prevent acute malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies.

As the fighting continues the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate in Syria. Unemployment rates have reached alarming levels and have been paralleled by sharp increased in food and fuel prices, eroding household purchasing power. This has made the Syrian population further reliant on food assistance. Today, over 700,000 more people are food insecure in Syria than the year prior.

WFP's expertise is also being leveraged inside Syria to provide logistical support for the wider UN humanitarian mission in the country. The WFP-led Logistics Cluster facilitated inter-agency convoys to several besieged areas in Syria, including Deir Ezzor and Al-Hasakeh governorates, delivering water, sanitization and hygiene (WASH), medical kits, and other food and non-food items for various humanitarian agencies and international NGOs.

While there are over 6 million people displaced internally in Syria, many people have been forced to leave the country. Since the war began, nearly 5 million Syrians have crossed their borders in to neighboring states. There, WFP is providing 1.6 million vulnerable Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq with electronic vouchers (e-cards) to buy food at local markets. This has also given rise to new innovative biometric tools like iris-scan technologies used in refugee camps in Jordan since February. To date—beyond the life-saving assistance they provide— these programs have injected over \$2 billion into the refugee-hosting countries neighboring Syria. An additional 30,000 Syrian refugees and vulnerable host-country

schoolchildren receive support from WFP-sponsored school feeding programs.

Bottom line: When the security of WFP and partner staff can be guaranteed, food is reaching hungry people in Syria in any way that it can.

Yet WFP faces very real obstacles in reaching those in need. Over 3.5 million people that require food assistance across Syria are not accessible with humanitarian assistance because of excessive violence and risk to aid operations. WFP cannot assist people living under ISIS control. **WFP already has the logistical network in place to reach these people. What is needed is unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance.**

Since July, civilian movement and humanitarian assistance into Eastern Aleppo, for example, has been cut off. At present, some 275,000 Syrians are trapped inside the city. Even following the Cessation of Hostilities on September 12th, two 20-truck WFP convoys were held at the Turkish border, unable to reach these people with food, water, shelter or medical care.

The decisions to hold these life-saving convoys is based on the very real threat to humanitarian staff, underscored by the tragic attack on a joint United Nations-Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) humanitarian convoy on Monday September 19th northwest of Aleppo. As stated by WFP's Executive Director Ertharin Cousin, "This assault on the humanitarian relief effort in Syria however will not discourage WFP from continuing to perform our life-saving service to all people in need across the country"—and it hasn't. Following a brief suspension, as of Wednesday, September 21st WFP has resumed its cross-border and cross-line convoys in Syria.

Syria is but one example of the wave of humanitarian crises sweeping the world. Today, global forced displacement—already at the highest levels since World War II—continues to increase. More than 65 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes as a result of conflict, persecution, and violence. The average length of displacement

has grown to 17 years and the numbers of refugees repatriating has declined to the lowest level in over 30 years.

The humanitarian system is struggling to keep pace with the ever-growing demands placed on it. Last year, WFP reached almost 77 million people with food assistance in 81 countries— that is almost 80 country operations and over 70 million people involved in crises beyond the Syrian conflict. WFP did this with only 56% of its total funding needs met, meaning many people beyond the reach of WFP went hungry.

And WFP is not alone. Despite the generosity demonstrated by increased support from donors over the years, huge gaps between assessed needs and confirmed contributions continue, especially as overall needs continue to grow. In 2007, a total of \$5.1 billion was sought in global humanitarian appeals. In 2016, the financial requirements total \$21.6 billion. As of August, only 35% of the resources required in 2016 were committed. These shortfalls have a very real impact on people whose lives have already been disrupted by conflict or natural disaster. The unprecedented scale of forced displacement must be met with unprecedented funding ambition from donors, the U.S. included.

We applaud efforts this week at the United Nations Summit on Refugees and Migrants and President Obama’s Leaders Summit on Refugees to promote improved international resettlement coordination, increased funding ambitions for humanitarian responses, and improved self-sufficiency of migrants and refugees.

Building on this progress, the U.S. should develop a concrete action plan that can help guide policy and shape the strategic direction of the international community. This action plan might be built on the following pillars:

1. Financing to Address Immediate Humanitarian Needs: We must ensure a higher level of predictable funding to meet global humanitarian needs.

2. **Increased Support to Front Line Refugee-Hosting Countries:**
Front line refugee-hosting countries must be seen as providing a global public good. They should be supported in their efforts to assist and protect refugees while providing opportunities for self-sufficiency, including jobs and education, for both refugees and their own citizens. Incentives for private sector investment must be identified and support for social safety nets must be provided.

3. **Bridging the Humanitarian/Development Divide:** The U.S. must look internally at its own operations to ensure that short-term humanitarian relief operations are integrated with long-term resilience building and development activities including disaster risk reduction, emergency preparedness and other resilience building efforts.