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## OPINION

# Conflict's Long Shadow Has a Name: It's Hunger

By Charles E. Owubah



Families arrive in South Sudan after fleeing conflict in Sudan. Credit: WFP/Hugh Rutherford

**NEW YORK, Apr 16 2024 (IPS)** - Scarce food and drinking water. Limited and inconsistent healthcare. Rapidly deteriorating mental health. With conflict on the rise globally, this is the grim reality for millions around the world.

April 7th will mark the sixth-month anniversary of the attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, which has killed over 30,000 people. It has left millions without shelter, medicine, food or clean water. Without intervention, 50% of Gaza's population is at imminent risk of famine.

While this tragedy understandably dominates global headlines, there are countless hostilities that don't make the news. Many bear grim similarities to Gaza, but the striking difference is that other places are seemingly invisible, their people left to suffer in conflict's dark shadow as hunger and an ever-rising death toll becomes the norm.

Though the ups and downs of fighting can be unpredictable, the link between conflict and hunger is not. Over 85% of people experiencing hunger crises worldwide live in conflict-affected countries.

Hunger can be both a trigger and a consequence of conflict; limited resources can drive disputes for food and the means to produce it, and conflict can disrupt harvests and force families from their homes.

Climate change makes it even harder for people to cope, since heatwaves, droughts and floods further lower crop yields and access to support.

Gender-based violence also increases during conflict. This can include sexual based violence, forced or early marriage, and intimate partner violence. Violence against women and girls is sometimes even used as a weapon of war.

For vulnerable populations trapped in forgotten crises, humanitarian aid—or the lack of it—can mean the difference between life and death.

In Eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, rampant violence has left nearly 7 million Congolese internally displaced, making it the second-largest crisis of this kind anywhere in the world. Hundreds of thousands are hungry and need immediate humanitarian assistance.

Since January's upsurge in conflict, Action Against Hunger health facilities in the region have admitted four times the number of severely malnourished children under five years old.

Outside the city of Goma and across North Kivu province, where there are almost 2.4 million displaced people, violence has stopped families from returning to their homes for weeks or months at a time, leaving them largely unable to grow food and few resources to buy it.

The fighting has involved indiscriminate targeting of civilians and infrastructure, militarization of camps for internally displaced people, and blockades on key supply routes.

Many families struggle to find basic necessities, let alone afford them. Humanitarian organizations can't deliver much-needed assistance. People are increasingly destitute and desperate.

Similarly, in Sudan, a year of conflict has left almost 18 million people – one third of the country's population – acutely food insecure. The conflict is primarily focused around the capital of Khartoum, with a devastating effect on the whole country. Around 10% of the population is on the brink of famine.

With key trade routes compromised, shortages of food, fuel, medicines and other basic supplies means prices are soaring, and the limited goods are out of reach of most families. A large-scale cholera outbreak is causing the situation to deteriorate further.

The disease leads to diarrhea and worsens malnutrition. It is so contagious even one case must be treated as an epidemic; Sudan has seen more than 10,000 cases, and counting. Cholera can kill within hours if not treated, but medical help is in short supply.

Violence prevents humanitarian workers from accessing hard-hit communities, leaving many without access to food, healthcare and basic necessities.

As a result, millions have fled their homes in search of food and safety. Nearly 11 million people are displaced, whether internally, in neighboring nations or scattered around the world. It is also the world's largest child displacement crisis, impacting four million children. Some are with family, some entirely on their own.

In Yemen, nine years of war has destroyed huge swaths of the country's infrastructure and left 17.6 million people, more than half the population, dependent on food aid. Every day, Yemeni families struggle to secure basics like food, clean water, and staples like cooking fuel, soap and other household supplies.

After the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza war, hostilities around the Red Sea and the recent U.S. designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization are combining to pose new challenges in an already complex region.

The U.S. designation effectively criminalized key transactions necessary for the imports Yemen relies on for 85% of its food, fuel supplies, and almost all medical supplies.

The stress of living under constant pressure to meet their most basic needs, and an estimated 377,000 conflict-related deaths, has meant Yemen also faces a severe mental health crisis.

More than a quarter of Yemenis—over eight million people—suffer from mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. According to surveys by Action Against Hunger and other data, the continuing conflict, forced displacement, deteriorating economic situation, poverty, and food shortages are exacerbating the prevalence of mental health challenges.

Despite the rising death tolls, unimaginable suffering and ongoing violence, these conflicts are largely forgotten. So are countless others. Funding for hunger-related aid is woefully insufficient.

In 2023, only 35% of appeals from countries dealing with crisis levels of hunger were satisfied, according to the Action Against Hunger 2023 Hunger Funding Gap Report.

Ignoring these crises means a terrible cost, both to the people impacted and also to ourselves. Today, the world is so small and interconnected that massive instability anywhere has ripples everywhere.

Of course, the ideal solution is peace. Until then, we need the international community to advocate for safe humanitarian access in conflict zones. We also need greater funding for the most basic of human rights, such as food and access to healthcare. Bringing attention to these forgotten crises is the first step toward both.

That is why we continue to call on the international community and major donors to prioritize the world's most vulnerable and to dramatically increase funding, especially through investment in locally-led NGOs that focus on gender in their programming.

While emergency aid is essential, we also need funding for long term approaches that build resilience, helping at-risk populations create their own path to a more secure future.

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