

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief
Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, Briefing to the Security Council on Armed Conflict
and Hunger**

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As delivered

Thank you very much, Madam President.

Famines and extreme hunger have been part of the human experience since the first person walked the earth. But it is possible, in our lifetime, to eradicate famine from the human experience. And I'd like to just take a few moments to explain to the Council why I think that's the case and how the Council can help towards that goal.

Despite the wildest predictions famines have become less frequent and less lethal over the past few decades. It's a big achievement. So what happened?

First. We've seen a dramatic expansion in agricultural output and productivity, making more food available and making it cheaper. In the last 50 years, big improvements in agriculture, from plant breeding to pest prevention to storage to irrigation to transportation, produced a 4-fold increase in food grain production, using only 12 per cent more agricultural land. Transportation networks, improvements in cold-chain technology, science and trade allow food to be available more consistently and more predictably.

That trend is likely to continue. Science and human ingenuity are likely to continue to increase productivity, and we will seize the enormous potential to develop agricultural land in less productive areas of the world with today's technology and rising demand.

Secondly, we've witnessed a global reduction in poverty. Large numbers of previously poor people have gained purchasing power over larger volumes of food now being produced. This would not have happened without international action and support. That support includes help with safety net schemes in some of the poorest countries over the past 20 years, which have been able to scale up and down as harvests fail or succeed, and

which have been adopted into national policy frameworks, and which mean that we don't have to see a situation in which drought automatically turns into famine.

So Madam President,

While most of the world is better off and faces fewer risks of famine and hunger, some people still experience the opposite.

The remaining risk of famine and hunger is now concentrated in a relatively small number of countries affected by large-scale, severe and protracted conflict.

Nearly two-thirds of the world's hungry live in countries in conflict. Nearly 500 million undernourished people – and almost 80 per cent of the world's 155 million stunted children – live in countries affected by conflict.

My colleagues at the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Food Programme together with the European Union released a new study yesterday, confirming that conflict – often conflated with extreme climatic shock and high prices of staple foods – is now the main driver of global food insecurity.

That includes the four countries where there was a famine risk last year. Famine was only prevented in those countries through concerted international efforts.

So we have to build on the experience of last year and sustain and expand our efforts in those countries with more funding and better access, while we continue to join-up humanitarian life saving with longer-term development efforts.

We need also to build in the vast experience in the humanitarian system, which, over the past decades, has become more effective, efficient and better funded. We have learned a difficult lesson: between hunger and death there lies disease. Our response has become more professional and more integrated. We cover health, nutrition and education in addition to food, water and shelter, which we used to focus on.

Most people affected by conflict live in rural areas. South Sudan's former breadbasket, the Equatorias, has nearly emptied as farmers have fled to Uganda. In cities, fighting hinders other food production, transport, and distribution to larger parts of the population, reducing access to food and causing prices to increase.

When civilians exhaust their resilience, they are often forced to flee. Once displaced, food insecurity increases for both displaced people and their hosts – communities who themselves are often living on the cusp of survival. So hunger is the clear corollary of the vicious cycle of displacement and conflict.

The behavior of combatants in these contexts is often atrocious. Humanitarian access – both by agencies to reach people and for people to reach aid – is too often difficult or denied. In some cases, starvation is being used as a weapon of warfare. Warring parties damage or destroy water systems, farms, livestock, markets. Food-sellers and traders face looting and exorbitant costs to get food to their clients.

Madam President,

International Humanitarian Law is designed to protect against hunger in armed conflict. The fundamental rules of distinction, proportionality and precaution serve to safeguard civilian objects necessary for food production and distribution.

International humanitarian law is very clear:

- It prohibits starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare.
- It prohibits attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless, objects that are indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.
- It requires that humanitarian personnel and assets be respected and protected.
- It requires that all parties to conflict allow and facilitate impartial humanitarian relief for civilians in need, and ensure that humanitarian personnel have the freedom of movement to carry out life-saving work.

Madam President,

While parties to conflict bear the primary responsibility for respecting international humanitarian law, *all* States carry a duty to ensure that that law is respected. Members of this Council have influence over parties to conflicts. This Council has the means to investigate violations of the law. This Council also has the means to enhance accountability when that law is violated.

There are no humanitarian solutions to conflict. We all know that peace and political solutions are what will disrupt the vicious cycle of conflict and hunger. This Council's main responsibility is peace and international security.

In other words, you can help prevent famine ever occurring again.

Thank you.