

Topic: Ensuring the safety of basic food supply in armed conflicts

Topic Background

As of 2023, armed conflicts are the leading cause of food insecurity worldwide. The 2023 Global Report on Food Crises estimates that over 117 million people are experiencing food insecurity as a result of armed conflict, with other interconnected leading causes including economic shocks and extreme weather events. War has the potential to interfere with or entirely halt the production, preparation, allocation, and consumption of food, making it extremely difficult to ensure the safety of food supply in any form. Many common aspects of conflict which can indirectly affect food supply are the disruption of trade routes, the displacement of individuals and livestock, and the destruction of infrastructure. A prime example of this can be seen in Syria, which has the sixth largest number of food insecure people in the world despite only having a population of around 21 million. More than half of the population is currently food insecure, with another large portion at risk. Much of this has come as a result of the massive internal displacement which has been occurring since the beginning of the Syrian Civil war in 2012 and other consequences of that same conflict.

It is important to note that “intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions”, is a war crime when committed in armed conflict under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). However, as is often the case, this does not prevent such events from occurring in many cases. This most often occurs in the form of the intentional displacement of civilians, which is one of the primary contributors to a lack of access to basic food supply. This has been seen most recently in the Israel-Palestine conflict, with hundreds of hectares of crops being destroyed by the aerial spraying of herbicides by Israel, and Gaza bakeries being targeted and destroyed by Israeli air attacks.

Regardless of the conflict, “each party to an armed conflict has primary responsibility for ensuring that the basic needs of the population under its control are met, including adequate food

and water supply,” according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). International humanitarian law also states that “impartial humanitarian organizations may offer their services to carry out humanitarian activities, including when a party is not able or willing to meet these needs in practice.” and “A party to the conflict may not arbitrarily or unlawfully refuse its consent to such activities.”

Armed conflicts also have the potential to disrupt basic food supply beyond the scope of the conflict itself. Ukraine, for example, is one of the world's top agricultural producers and exporters according to the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, with over two thirds of its land being dedicated to agricultural production. It is estimated that the total value of losses has exceeded \$34.25 billion. The FAO Food Price Index has hit several all-time highs since the beginning of the war. Lower income countries which rely heavily on imports have been hit the hardest by this, particularly countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia which depended on imports from the Black Sea.

U.N. Involvement

The primary United Nations agency responsible for ensuring basic food supply in armed conflicts is the World Food Programme. The WFP works closely with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as well as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). In October 2020, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to WFP for “its efforts to combat hunger, for its contribution to bettering conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict”. The WFP has been very active in 2023 in countries such as Yemen and Syria as they struggle to meet basic nutrition needs in their respective crises.

In Yemen, WFP aims to provide 15 million people with emergency food assistance as in-kind rations of flour, pulses, oil, sugar, salt, or voucher or cash to purchase the same quantity of food. They are focusing especially on breastfeeding women and children under the age of five, as the malnutrition of those groups is most likely to cause lasting issues in the population. The WFP

has also aimed to provide schoolchildren with highly nutritional snacks during the school day in 2023. The UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), which is managed by the WFP, brings humanitarian workers into five key hubs within Yemen and the surrounding area in order to make these goals a reality.

The WFP also is very active in Syria, providing food to 5.6 million people in all 14 governorates with the goal of preventing them from slipping further into hunger. Like in Yemen, there is a special emphasis on ensuring that pregnant and breastfeeding women as well as children between the ages of 2 months and six years are having their nutrition needs met. WFP provides fortified snacks, fresh meals and food assistance, through electronic vouchers, to more than 460,000 students in schools. There was a massive increase in the need for food assistance after the Turkey-Syria earthquake in February 2023, after which the WFP provided nearly three million people starting from the hours immediately after the disaster.

An organization which works very closely to the WFP is the Food and Agriculture Organization. FAO's goal is to achieve food and security for all and make sure that people have regular access to enough high-quality food and lead active, healthy lives. According to a 2023 evaluation at FAO, the organization supports the safety of basic food supply in conflict regions by providing technical assistance to the countries with the aim of increasing agricultural production. They also seek to improve overall economic prosperity and provide humanitarian assistance for the overall populations. The FAO uses practices such as technical diplomacy, information systems and context analysis in order to inform their decisions regarding how to help each individual conflict zone as effectively as possible. They worked in unison with the WFP in Ukraine in order to provide cash assistance to families so that they might rebuild their day-to-day lives. The two organizations have also worked together in order to clear agricultural land from remnants of the war and help farmers resume production. The FAO and WFP have produced several joint reports since 2016, which give overviews of the issue of food insecurity in conflict zones so that United Nations Security Council members can act accordingly.

One of the most important actions taken by the UN on this topic was Resolution 2417, which was adopted by the Security Council in 2018. The resolution reaffirms the international

humanitarian law absolutely forbids the destruction of agricultural resources such as farms during times of conflict, as well as the primary responsibility of States to protect the population throughout their whole territory. The council also stressed the need for gender and age sensitive humanitarian assistance to ensure that the most vulnerable groups in these regions are getting the help they need. They also called on all parties to armed conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law to allow safe and unimpeded access of humanitarian personnel to civilians in armed conflicts. The resolution strongly condemned the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and urged all parties to protect civilian infrastructure which is critical to the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Bloc Positions

Every country which was on the security council in 2018 unanimously adopted Resolution 2417, condemning the starving of civilians and the unlawful denying of humanitarian access as warfare tactics. However, this does not necessarily mean that all of them follow the rules outlined in that resolution. The most recent example of this can be seen in the cutting off of food supply and denial of humanitarian aid in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Most countries in the world contribute monetarily in some way to the World Food Program, with 110 total donors and 35 flexible donors. The WFP has contributed in many areas of the world including Ukraine, where they deliver monthly food kits and ready-to-eat food rations, primarily in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine where supply chains and markets are no longer functional. Black Sea countries like Turkiye, as well as other major trade partners such as Poland, especially have an incentive to rebuild the agriculture sector of Ukraine because they were benefiting from many of the country's exports.

The European Union is actively involved in humanitarian efforts and often contributes to addressing food security challenges in conflict-affected regions. The EU provides financial support, engages in diplomatic initiatives, and collaborates with international organizations to improve access to food in conflict zones. Similarly, the African Union plays a very large role in addressing conflicts on the African continent. It often works in collaboration with the UN and

regional organizations to provide humanitarian assistance, including food aid, in areas affected by armed conflicts.

Questions to consider

- What is the current state of the basic food supply in your country?
- How does armed conflict affect food production, distribution, and access?
- Does your country support any existing policies or initiatives addressing food safety during conflicts?
- What obstacles are there to delivering humanitarian aid in conflict zones, and how can these be addressed?
- What long-term strategies can be implemented to ensure food security beyond immediate conflicts?

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