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“East Africa’s Quiet Famine”
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
March 28, 2017

According to estimates by the United Nations, more than 28 million people in East Africa today desperately need immediate food aid. Three countries in the region face emergency-level food aid needs – Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. Meanwhile, areas of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda also face crisis-level hunger with some households already in emergency conditions.

In Somalia, at least 6.2 million people need food assistance – that’s more than half that country’s population. In South Sudan, nearly two-thirds of the population requires assistance, and in fact, about 4.9 million South Sudanese – about 40 percent of the population – face severe, life-threatening hunger with that number expected to rise to 5.5 million by July. In Sudan, more than 5.8 million Sudanese are believed to require assistance – 3.3 million of them in the still-embattled Darfur provinces.

Unfortunately, the devastating impact of the current famine isn’t confined to the hardest-hit drought areas. Uganda, itself struggling with the effects of drought in some areas, has had to contend with nearly 800,000 refugees from South Sudan. By the beginning of this month, as many as 3,000 South Sudanese a week crossed the border into Uganda.

Lest we get caught up in the huge numbers involved in this crisis, we must always keep in mind what those numbers actually mean for people the long-term. According to United Nations World Food Program calculations in January, global acute malnutrition rates for Somali children and pregnant and lactating women entering Ethiopia reached 78 percent. That means that Somali children in the womb won’t have enough nourishment to complete their growth in utero. Most, if not all, will be born stunted, which will be made worse by their continuing lack of nutrition once born. Their mothers will be severely weakened and may not survive childbirth. All of them will have damaged immune systems and will be susceptible to diseases such as cholera or acute diarrhea and may die a preventable death. In any event, the futures of far too many children and their potential contributions to their society will be forever limited, as stunting cannot be reversed.

In 2011, the first UN-declared drought since the 1980s occurred in East Africa, directly affecting more than 10 million people. This subcommittee held a hearing on that crisis on September 28th of that year

and worked with humanitarian groups to ensure that aid was available and provided in the most-in-need areas of East Africa. We will follow this hearing with a similar effort.

Six years ago, there was great attention given to the famine then. It was an emergency that caught the world's attention. Somehow, the current famine has been caught up in the numerous global crises we face today and is not as much in the news as perhaps the largest crisis of its kind in recent years deserves to be.

In 2011, we struggled with how to get humanitarian aid to those in Somalia who lived in areas controlled by al-Shabaab. That problem has not been eliminated six years later. In 2017, not only is the ongoing conflict in Somalia hampering humanitarian efforts there, but the continuing civil conflict in South Sudan has amplified the impact of the drought. In 2015, a congressional staff delegation visited the Equatorial provinces of that country, which still produced food, even though poor transportation prevented it from being distributed beyond the borders of that region. There was no conflict there at that time, only internally displaced people. Now all three Equatoria provinces are seeing a spreading conflict, and with farmers unable to plant or harvest, the lack of food will only worsen over time.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has accused South Sudan's government of ignoring the plight of its citizens struggling through the famine. He accused that government's leadership of a refusal "to even acknowledge the crisis or fulfill its responsibilities to end it." In a time in which access to food is so critical in South Sudan, militias in that country – supporting both the government and rebels – have been accused of intentionally destroying crops, looting cattle and damaging vital water sources. In July of last year, it is believed that government soldiers were responsible for looting 1.5 metric tons of food from the World Food Programme warehouse in the capital city of Juba.

The conflicts in Somalia and South Sudan affect the entire region and place added burdens on their neighbors, who also must cope with recurring drought. These two countries (along with Eritrea) remain the largest sources of refugees globally. We cannot control the weather patterns that lead to recurring droughts in East Africa, but we must find ways to end the conflicts in those two nations so that man-made disasters don't outstrip the impact of nature.

The term "famine," like the term "genocide," should not be used lightly. To be considered a famine, there must be an extreme lack of food in at least 20 percent of the households in any area, acute malnourishment must affect 30 percent of children and a crude death rate of more than 2 deaths per 10,000 must exist daily in the affected areas. As our witnesses will describe for us today, the situation is already or soon will be in a state of famine in areas of East Africa.

Our mission today is to better understand the parameters of this crisis, its causative factors and the most effective action that must be taken to save lives and end the threat of even greater human casualty.