

FAMINE FACT SHEET

Famine, the deadliest form of hunger, continues to reoccur and is especially hard on children, but no one involved escapes the horrors of starvation.

In 2024, a severe famine is reported in Northwest Sudan. Surveys collected through the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS.net) indicate that child deaths from starvation or related diseases are at “catastrophic levels.” Very high levels of malnutrition are reported from one camp of internally displaced persons, the Zamzam camp, which has been receiving aid for decades. In 2024, estimates are that one child has died every two hours in the Zamzam refugee camp due in large part to malnutrition. Loss of life—child or adult—is preventable with enough food, clean water, and access to healthcare.

Other parts of the world also face severe food insecurity that can lead to famine, for instance: Burkina Faso, South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mali, Yemen, Haiti, and the Central African Republic.

WHAT IS FAMINE?

Famine occurs when there is an extreme lack of food in a population with resulting high rates of acute malnutrition and loss of life by starvation. Famines are also characterized often by mass distress migration, loss of assets, movements to camps and deaths from communicable diseases. Malnutrition impairs each person’s immune system so that diseases that would normally not kill became lethal in famines.

Famines can be said to occur at almost any population scale, whether a village or district or larger area. Occurring at regional levels, isolated locations (such as Zamzam refugee camp), or at the country level, famines are frequently man-made and therefore preventable. The 2003 famine in southern Africa tracked across five or six countries, caused in large part by poor rainfall, but augmented by monocropping patterns of farmers only growing rain-dependent maize.

Famines also occur as a result of war, such as World War II, the Biafra war of independence of 1967 (better known as the Biafra famine) or Ethiopia in 1984/85. Famines can result in the displacement of large populations as people are forced to leave their homes in



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search of food—often, an irreversible situation that makes it harder for people to regain their livelihoods and self-sufficiency before the event. Today, millions of people across the globe live in near famine-like conditions. Declarations of famine are complex and by no means an exact science—and can even be political given that conflict is a major driver of modern famines. Amid security concerns and limited humanitarian access, precise data collection is a challenge.

Famines rarely occur over a short time period but take one or two years to build up. Unlike an array of natural disasters which can kill people in a few minutes, as is the case in earthquakes, floods and volcanic eruptions, famine occur only over a longer period of time.

Humanitarian experts have for a long time seen that responses to famine are slow and late, with millions of people dying. As a result, humanitarians have tried to figure out how to predict and anticipate famines so that NGOs can mitigate the effects of famine.

In 1985 USAID created the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) which has dramatically improved the ability of aid agencies to deploy aid resources—like food aid—to populations early in the famine cycle. With interventions, widespread catastrophic levels of hunger can be avoided.

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS OF FAMINE?

Historically, famines have been declared by donors, by governments and by local authorities. Some famines are ascribed by historians. In fact, famines are the most frequent form of disaster reported worldwide over the long course of historical records.

Although there is no single authority responsible for declaring when famine occurs, the Food and Agriculture Organization has promoted a tool, the Integrated Phase Classification – or IPC—to try to measure famines with more reliability and rigor. Today, several United Nations agencies work together to promote the application of the IPC. The IPC includes two parallel tracks, one looking at food access and the other at rate of malnutrition. Making sense of famine conditions therefore depends greatly on the ability of NGOs or other groups to conduct surveys of the rates of malnutrition.

The IPC scores conditions at any given point in time along a five-phase scale to assess the level of food insecurity in a country. The scale ranges from minimal (Phase 1) to catastrophic (phase 5)—the latter indicating that famine is present. The IPC’s criteria include:

- **Food Insecurity:** At least 20% of households in an area face an extreme lack of food.
- **Malnutrition:** Over 30% of children under five suffer from acute malnutrition, meaning they are too thin for their height and therefore at risk of death.
- **Mortality:** The death rate exceeds two people per 10,000 per day due to starvation or the combined effects of malnutrition and disease.

WHY DOES A DECLARATION OF FAMINE MATTER?

A famine declaration can lead to an increase in public awareness and a stronger global response, additional funding, and policy changes. The declaration can also be used as evidence of war crimes when there is proof that starvation was weaponized. Donor organizations, such as USAID, the Canadian Government, the European Commission, or the World Food Programme appropriate new funds (or food) or redirect existing food aid to areas at risk of famine.

Humanitarian NGOs also adjust where they deploy resources—especially when FEWS.net provides early warning of where the needs are greatest.



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WHY HAPPENS WHEN A PERSON IS STARVING?

Starvation is a slow and cruel death.

Without food for a prolonged period, the body relies first on stored fats for energy. When fats are depleted, brain function is compromised, organs and muscles weaken, and remaining energy is redirected to the brain and is also used to maintain heart function. Physically, the body appears gaunt and there is a vacancy in a person’s eyes. Swelling from an extreme lack of protein is seen in children.

It can become difficult to push food through a person’s system after prolonged deprivation. The immune system is impaired, making a person vulnerable to infectious diseases which often lead to death. If no disease is present, the heart gradually weakens and eventually stops.

Even if interventions are effective, a person who has experienced starvation or childhood malnutrition may have lifelong physical and cognitive impacts

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF FAMINE?

1. **Conflict is the main cause of famine today.** Starvation is often used as a weapon of war. Crops may be deliberately destroyed, and warring parties can block humanitarian assistance from reaching vulnerable people.
1. **Climate change may become a major cause of famine.** Frequent droughts are part of growing numbers of hungry people—especially in African countries like Somalia and Ethiopia. Extreme weather affects food availability and access.
1. **Economic shocks can trigger famine.** Inflation, rising food costs, currency volatility, and food supply disruptions impair access to food.

Humanitarian NGOs, working with donors, are increasingly preventing famines or at least deaths from famines, even though the media is more likely to report famines that have occurred than famines that have been averted.

Since 1976, World Hunger Education Service has been dedicated to reducing hunger and malnutrition by equipping students, educators, and the public with in-depth knowledge about food insecurity in the U.S. and globally. Explore more educational resources and fact sheets on the Hunger Notes website: worldhunger.org.

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