

# Deliberate Famine Should Be a War Crime: UN Expert

The proportion of undernourished people living in countries in conflict and protracted crises is almost three times higher than that in other developing countries.



Conflicts have proliferated around the world and with them has come a rise in food insecurity. Credit: Reuters

The deliberate starvation of civilians could amount to a war crime and should be prosecuted, said an independent UN human rights expert.

In a new report, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Hilal Elver, examined the right to food in conflict situations and found a grim picture depicting the most severe humanitarian crisis since the UN was established.

“Contrary to popular belief, casualties resulting directly from combat usually make up only a small proportion of deaths in conflict zones, with most individuals, in fact perishing from hunger and disease,” she said.

Conflicts have proliferated around the world and with them has come a rise in food insecurity.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the proportion of undernourished people living in countries in conflict and protracted crises is almost three times higher than that in other developing countries.

In five conflict-stricken countries alone, approximately 20 million are facing famine and starvation.

Another estimated 70 million people in 45 countries currently require emergency food assistance, a 40% increase from 2015.

Since the human right to food is a universal one, Elver noted that countries and other parties to conflicts must act and avoid using food as a weapon of war.

“If the famine [occurs] from deliberate action by state or other players, using food as a weapon of war is an international crime and there is an individual responsibility to that,” she said.

“The international community should make it clear that this is a war crime or a crime against humanity, otherwise we will give a certain permission [to it],” Elver continued.

In Yemen, rates of acute malnutrition have increased dramatically since the beginning of the civil war in 2015, making it the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Approximately 60% of the population are food insecure while seven million are at risk of famine and acute food insecurity, a situation that is expected to worsen without an increase in emergency food assistance.

According to the World Food Programme, over three million children and pregnant or nursing women are acutely malnourished, making them susceptible to communicable diseases such as cholera.

Already, a severe cholera outbreak that began in April has killed over 2,000 people and has exacerbated the nutrition crisis.

Parties to the ongoing conflict have played a significant and deliberate role in the decreased access to food, including a Saudi Arabia-imposed aerial and naval blockade on a country which previously imported 90% of its food.

Air strikes carried out by the coalition have also targeted the country’s agricultural sector including farms, further limiting access to food, while sieges by Houthi fighters in numerous cities have prevented staple items from reaching civilians.

Ta’izz, the Middle Eastern country’s second-largest city, was besieged by Houthi fighters for over a year, causing blockages in supply routes and dire food shortages.

Elver said that Yemen is a “clear situation” where famine constitutes a crime against humanity in which both the Saudi-led coalition and Houthis are responsible.

She noted, however, that there is still widespread impunity in situations when famine is deliberately caused and pointed to the International Criminal Court as an example which has not prosecuted individuals responsible for such crises.

Though UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has included the Saudi-led coalition in his annual shame list for violations against children, Elver called for the creation of legal mandates to prevent famine and protect people's right to food.

This includes the development of international legal standards to reinforce the norm that deliberate starvation is a war crime or a crime against humanity and the referral of the most serious cases to the ICC for investigation and potential prosecution.

The formal recognition of famine as a crime can prevent the tendency of governments "to hide behind a curtain of natural disasters and state sovereignty to use hunger as a genocidal weapon," the report states.

"We can see the famine coming, it doesn't just happen in one day," Elver said.

*(IPS)*