

# Famine declared in South Sudan



By Louise Marsland

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Five million people are at risk of famine in South Sudan and humanitarian aid is urgently needed for food, agriculture and nutrition. A formal famine declaration means that people have already begun dying of hunger.



Image by 123RF

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), have warned that urgent action is needed to prevent more people from dying of hunger. If sustained and adequate assistance is delivered urgently, the hunger situation can be improved in the coming months and further suffering mitigated.

War and a collapsing economy have left some 100,000 people facing immediate starvation in parts of South Sudan where famine was declared this week, the UN agencies are warning. A further 1 million people are classified as being on the brink of famine.

The total number of food insecure people is expected to rise to 5.5 million at the height of the lean season in July if nothing is done to curb the severity and spread of the food crisis.

According to the [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(IPC\) update released](#) Tuesday by the government, three UN agencies and other humanitarian partners – the 4.9 million people (40% of South Sudan's population) are in need of urgent food, agriculture and nutrition assistance.

## Humanitarian assistance

Unimpeded humanitarian access to everyone facing famine, or at risk of famine, is urgently needed to reverse the escalating catastrophe, the UN agencies urged. Further spread of famine can only be prevented if humanitarian assistance is scaled up and reaches the most vulnerable.

Famine is currently affecting parts of Unity State in the northern-central part of the country. A formal famine declaration means people have already started dying of hunger. The situation is the worst hunger catastrophe since fighting erupted more than three years ago.

“Famine has become a tragic reality in parts of South Sudan and our worst fears have been realised. Many families have exhausted every means they have to survive,” said FAO representative in South Sudan, Serge Tissot. “The people are predominantly farmers and war has disrupted agriculture. They’ve lost their livestock, even their farming tools. For months there has been a total reliance on whatever plants they can find and fish they can catch.”

The heads of three UN agencies, FAO, UNICEF, WFP, issued the following joint call for urgent action to allow aid to reach people facing starvation in famine-hit areas of South Sudan: “Despite a substantial humanitarian response in South Sudan by FAO, UNICEF, WFP and partners, food insecurity has deteriorated to unprecedented levels in these areas owing to protracted violence, insecurity, displacement and a protection crisis that has prevented adequate humanitarian access and aid delivery.

“We stand united in our appeal to all parties to facilitate immediate and safe access for humanitarian actors and to respect the humanitarian space as a wider famine can only be prevented if assistance is urgently scaled up and reaches those most in need.

“Massive and timely humanitarian interventions averted a famine over the last three years, mitigating the worst effects of the crisis. However, the provision of humanitarian assistance has become increasingly challenging in the above-mentioned areas.

“Today, almost 5 million South Sudanese are facing severe food insecurity, and are not only unable to meet their basic food needs, but they also must sell critical assets in order to buy food. The situation is expected to continue deteriorating through the lean season, which begins in July 2017.

“People are dying of hunger. We must take action now,” the statement ended.

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Malnutrition is a major public health emergency, exacerbated by the widespread fighting, displacement, poor access to health services and low coverage of sanitation facilities. The IPC report estimates that 14 of the 23 assessed counties have global acute malnutrition (GAM) at or above the emergency threshold of 15%, with some areas as high as 42%.

“More than one million children are currently estimated to be acutely malnourished across South Sudan; over a quarter of a million children are already severely malnourished. If we do not reach these children with urgent aid many of them will die,” said Jeremy Hopkins, UNICEF representative in South Sudan. “We urge all parties to allow humanitarian organisations unrestricted access to the affected populations, so we can assist the most vulnerable and prevent yet another humanitarian catastrophe.”

“This famine is man-made. WFP and the entire humanitarian community have been trying with all our might to avoid this catastrophe, mounting a humanitarian response of a scale that quite frankly would have seemed impossible three years ago. But we have also warned that there is only so much that humanitarian assistance can achieve in the absence of meaningful peace and security, both for relief workers and the crisis-affected people they serve,” said WFP country director, Joyce Luma. “We will continue doing everything we possibly can to hold off and reverse the spread of famine.”

## **Man-made famine**

Across the country, three years of conflict have severely undermined crop production and rural livelihoods. The upsurge in violence since July 2016 has further devastated food production, including in previously stable areas. Soaring inflation – up to 800% year-on-year – and market failure, have also hit areas that traditionally rely on markets to meet food needs. Urban populations are also struggling to cope with massive price rises on basic food items.

A total of 1.4 million children are at imminent risk of death as famine looms in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. This year, UNICEF is working with partners to provide therapeutic treatment to 220,000 severely malnourished children in Nigeria; over 200,000 severely malnourished children in South Sudan; more than 200,000 severely malnourished children in Somalia; and 320,000 children in Yemen.

“Time is running out for more than a million children,” said UNICEF executive director Anthony Lake. “We can still save many lives. The severe malnutrition and looming famine are largely man-made. Our common humanity demands faster action. We must not repeat the tragedy of the 2011 famine in the Horn of Africa.”

## **Relief operations**

FAO, UNICEF and WFP, with other partners, have conducted massive relief operations since the conflict began, and intensified those efforts throughout 2016 to mitigate the worst effects of the humanitarian crisis. In Northern Bahr El Ghazal state, among others, the IPC assessment team found that humanitarian relief had lessened the risk of famine there.

FAO has provided emergency livelihood kits to more than 2.3 million people to help them fish or plant vegetables. FAO has also vaccinated more than 6 million livestock such as goats and sheep to prevent further loss.

WFP continues to scale up its support in South Sudan as humanitarian needs increase, and plans to provide food and nutrition assistance to 4.1 million people through the hunger season in South Sudan this year. This includes lifesaving emergency food, cash and nutrition assistance for people displaced and affected by conflict, as well as community-based recovery or resilience programs and school meals.

In 2016, WFP reached a record 4 million people in South Sudan with food assistance — including cash assistance amounting to US\$13.8 million, and more than 265,000 metric tons of food and nutrition supplies. It is the largest number of people assisted by WFP in South Sudan since independence, despite problems resulting from the challenging context.

UNICEF aims to treat 207,000 children for severe acute malnutrition in 2017. Working with over 40 partners and in close collaboration with WFP, UNICEF is supporting 620 outpatient therapeutic programme sites and about 50 inpatient therapeutic sites across the country to provide children with urgently needed treatment. Through a rapid response mechanism carried out jointly with WFP, UNICEF continues to reach communities in the most remote locations. These rapid response missions treat thousands of children for malnutrition as well as provide them with immunisation services, safe water and sanitation which also prevents recurring malnutrition.

The United Nations, through the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF) – a multi-donor fund that responds to critical humanitarian needs in Sudan – has allocated \$21 million to help thousands of people in need of humanitarian assistance across Sudan in 2017.

The humanitarian challenges in Sudan are diverse and complex, including in Darfur where over 3 million people are

estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance. The SHF focuses on providing emergency assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, and also those returning home after a long period of displacement. Funds to the SHF for this allocation have been donated by the governments of Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

“The Sudan Humanitarian Fund will continue to support the frontline responders in Sudan, the organisations working to provide relief every day, especially to the most vulnerable, such as women and children,” said Marta Ruedas, the resident and humanitarian coordinator in Sudan.

### **Aid to other parts of Africa**

The situation is dire in Ethiopia too and to provide time-critical aid to more than 785,000 people suffering from hunger, malnutrition and severe water shortages in Ethiopia’s worst-hit Somali region, emergency relief coordinator and under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, Stephen O’Brien, has released US\$18.5 million from the UN’s Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)

Over the past two years, CERF has allocated a total of \$47 million to aid operations in Ethiopia.

With the Horn of Africa facing one of the worst droughts in decades, an additional 5.6 million people in Ethiopia alone are in desperate need of life’s basic necessities.

The CERF funds will immediately provide affected people with access to water and health, nutritional and agricultural services. The funds will help pastoralist communities in the Somali region, who are most in need, and thousands of whom have been forced to move in search of water and pasture.

In northeast Nigeria, the number of children with severe acute malnutrition is expected to reach 450,000 this year in the conflict-affected states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe. Few.

In Somalia, drought conditions are threatening an already fragile population battered by decades of conflict. Almost half the population, or 6.2 million people, are facing acute food insecurity and in need of humanitarian assistance. Some 185,000 children are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition this year, however this figure is expected to rise to 270,000 in the next few months.

And in Yemen, where a conflict has been raging for the past two years, 462,000 children are currently suffering from severe acute malnutrition – a nearly 200% increase since 2014.

*Source: APO.*

## **ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND**

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