

# Famine in the Republic of South Sudan

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The first famine in six years anywhere in the world was announced in South Sudan on 20 February 2017. The South Sudanese government and the United Nations have said that 100,000 citizens are currently facing starvation with millions close to the edge.<sup>1</sup> The Republic of South Sudan is a small country consisting of the 10 southern states of Sudan that became independent in 2011.<sup>2</sup> The state is a product of Africa's longest civil war that ended in 2005.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by another civil war that raged from 2013-2015 and displaced 2.2 million people while undermining the fledgling country's success.<sup>4</sup> The civil war and the economic instability it brought with it are contributing factors to the famine that has arrived in South Sudan and is now approaching other states in the region, such as Yemen, Somalia, and Nigeria,<sup>5</sup> according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network.<sup>6</sup> Famine previously came to South Sudan in 1998 after its independence from Sudan, illustrating that famine can be manmade through instability and economic hardship.<sup>7</sup> The Unity State, one of South Sudan's ten states, has been the worst affected. The Unity state was hit hard due to its history; Unity is where most of the fighting took place during the civil war between government and rebel forces.<sup>8</sup> Humanitarian groups have expressed concern that the famine will spread if aid does not arrive soon. A WFP report states, "If sustained and adequate assistance is delivered urgently, the hunger situation can be improved in the coming months and further suffering mitigated."<sup>9</sup>

The United Nations World Food Program (WFP) has stated that more than 40% of the population of South Sudan, 4.9 million people, is without food. Famine is declared only once certain criteria have been fulfilled. These criteria stipulate that "at least 20% of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope, acute malnutrition rates exceed 30%, the death rate exceeds two persons per day per 10,000 persons."<sup>10</sup> Neither the food shortage, the drought resulting in food shortage, or the declaration of famine obligate the United Nations or any state to provide aid. The declaration of famine solely serves to bring the issue to the attention of the global public and the media. Due to the large number of conflicts occurring throughout the globe, it is possible that multiple famines may occur in different regions and enough humanitarian aid will not be provided to ease the suffering.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "South Sudan Declares Famine in Unity State." *BBC News*. BBC, 20 Feb. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "South Sudan Country Profile." *BBC News*. BBC, 24 Feb. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "South Sudan Declares Famine in Unity State." *BBC News*. BBC, 20 Feb. 2017.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gramer, Robbie. "'Our Worst Fears Have Been Realized': The Famine We Could Have Stopped in South Sudan." *Foreign Policy*. N.p., 24 Feb. 2017.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

WFP and NGOs are now recognizing that more than one million children are on the brink of starvation. Tissot, who works for the Food and Agriculture Association of the United Nations, has said, "Our worst fears have been realized...Many families have exhausted every means they have to survive."<sup>12</sup> The war has disrupted farming and left people with little choice but to scavenge for food to survive. Drew, who works for Oxfam in South Sudan, has expressed concern that "People have been pushed to the brink, [they are] surviving on what they can find to eat in swamps."<sup>13</sup> She also notes that conflict is preventing humanitarian aid workers from reaching those most in need.

What is perhaps most frustrating about this situation is that it is not a sudden onset. A WFP spokesperson in South Sudan, Fominyen, said "Food insecurity, hunger, malnutrition has been getting steadily worse since the conflict started three years ago."<sup>14</sup> This is a clear acknowledgement that the issue could have been treated if, firstly, international attention had been paid to it, and, secondly, if conflict zones had been penetrable to humanitarian aid workers. Additionally, the United Nations prevented an embargo on South Sudan that could have helped to temper the ongoing conflict.<sup>15</sup> Humanitarian groups have also been asking for food and monetary contributions for the better part of a year. Part of the issue preventing humanitarian aid workers from accessing these areas of need is bureaucracy, but a perhaps larger issue is that WFP has limited food supplies that could run out during the six months following February 2017.<sup>16</sup>

The conflict and the famine have caused Africa's largest refugee crisis, with 1.5 million refugees moving from South Sudan to Uganda, where refugee camps are reaching capacity<sup>17</sup> and potentially creating another 1.5 million internally displaced peoples.<sup>18</sup> The conflict between the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) and the government has grown in the latter half of 2016, reaching the countryside and destroying agricultural land.<sup>19</sup>

Unless some form of humanitarian aid is able to penetrate these conflict-ridden areas, 275,000 children could starve to death within the year. The combination of conflict destroying agricultural land and driving up food prices, combined with climate change-driven drought across the region has proved to be deadly.<sup>20</sup> The global public should be ashamed of allowing the famine in South Sudan to occur. We were made aware that the famine was developing, and that people were starving. International Non-governmental

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<sup>12</sup> Sevenzo, Farai, and Bryony Jones. "Famine Declared in South Sudan." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 22 Feb. 2017.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Gramer, Robbie. "'Our Worst Fears Have Been Realized': The Famine We Could Have Stopped in South Sudan." *Foreign Policy*. N.p., 24 Feb. 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Sevenzo, Farai, and Bryony Jones. "Famine Declared in South Sudan." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 22 Feb. 2017.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (The Gambia), Amnesty International, et al. "Renewing the Mandate of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan and Addressing the Need for Accountability." *Human Rights Watch*. N.p., 24 Feb. 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Organizations and governments alike claimed they would not let another famine like the 2011 famine in Somalia happen again in our lifetimes. Yet, we see families “surviving on what they can find to eat in swamps.”<sup>21</sup> While I wish I could end this article on a happier note, I am forced to admit that there is little to hope until the conflict is mitigated and humanitarian aid can take place.

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<sup>21</sup> Gramer, Robbie. "Our Worst Fears Have Been Realized': The Famine We Could Have Stopped in South Sudan." *Foreign Policy*. N.p., 24 Feb. 2017.

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