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Editorial

Aid for a World in Crisis

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In this season of sharing and goodwill, there is a sad truth to be faced: Despite the generosity of donor countries and the enormous sacrifices of relief workers, the humanitarian agencies are increasingly unable to respond fully to the world's ever mounting hunger crises.

It would be easy to say that the cause of this disturbing new phenomenon is simply a lack of cash. Yes, funding for humanitarian emergencies is never easy to secure, and traditional donor fatigue is certainly playing a part. But the main challenge comes from a surge in needs driven in part by armed conflict and political crises but, more important, by weather-related disasters. And in recent years both of these have been on the increase.

For example, in the current food crisis gripping southern Africa, new estimates of the number of hungry people requiring international aid from the World Food Programme have recently risen from 12.8 million to a staggering 14.4 million. At the same time, another serious drought looms over the Horn of Africa, where the number of people threatened by starvation has unexpectedly tripled to more than 10 million -- confronting international relief organizations with another crisis of vast proportions.

Simultaneously, on the other side of the African continent, drought in Mauritania is already causing serious hardship and is spreading to five neighboring countries. As many as 1.5 million people are threatened, and, depending on how the rains go, vast swaths of the western Sahel region could be affected.

In Central America, more than 1.5 million people have seen their food supplies wither because of drought, while across the ocean Asia is battling floods. In Afghanistan, four years of drought and conflict are still wreaking havoc with the lives of almost 10 million people. While the international community initially responded generously to appeals for aid, there is still a shortfall of contributions, and there are concerns of another outflow of refugees because of a lack of food.

Worse still, in North Korea 3 million hungry women, children and elderly people are being cut off from international aid because of a lack of contributions, and an additional 1.5 million people face a similar cutoff in January.

The combined needs of these 40 million people alone cannot be shrugged off as being faraway problems that will pass us by. Nor can the needs of 300 million hungry children worldwide. These children risk physical and mental stunting and will be a drag on the social, political and economic development of their societies.

The reality is that the world has changed. Globalization has ensured that, like terrorism, hunger and poverty have a way of finding a way into our lives. They enter our consciousness through television images or spread into our societies through illegal migration as people are forced to abandon their homes to escape a life of suffering.

Our world has also changed in its expectations of governments and international agencies. For example, when the World Food Programme was created 40 years ago, it was essentially envisioned as a tool for using the enormous grain surpluses in producing countries to assist the needy.

Since then the emergence of a global 24-hour news culture has wrought profound changes. The well-meaning "good works" approach in responding to hunger crises has been overtaken by the imperative to prevent them and to do so efficiently. Modern society is not prepared to tolerate the face of mass hunger.

But the unfortunate reality is that agencies such as the World Food Programme, as well as hundreds of highly effective nongovernmental organizations, are finding it increasingly difficult to respond to world crises. Dependent on voluntary contributions, we are caught between the rising needs of millions of hungry people and government budgets that are already stretched and contending with a global economic downturn.

The difficulty is further compounded because most catastrophes are unanticipated and don't fit neatly into the budget planning process of governments. It is clear that business as usual is insufficient to address the rising humanitarian crises we confront. Few governments like to approach their legislatures to seek supplemental appropriations for crises that are thousands of miles away.

If we want to look at our television sets or glance at ourselves in a mirror without wincing, we will have to find new funding mechanisms to respond. This will require the determined focus and imagination of governments as well as the wholehearted support of ordinary citizens who are the final arbiters in deciding what kind of societies they want to live in.

The writer is executive director of the World Food Programme, the world's largest humanitarian agency.

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