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## UN officials warn of worst famine crisis since World War II

By Patrick Martin

13 March 2017

More than 20 million people face imminent starvation in four countries, United Nations officials warned over the weekend, the largest humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II. All four countries—Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria—are wracked by civil wars in which the US government is implicated in funding and arming one of the contending sides.

UN emergency relief coordinator Stephen O'Brien gave a report to the UN Security Council Friday detailing the conditions in the four countries, and the UN issued published further materials on the crisis Saturday, seeking to raise \$4.4 billion in contributions for emergency relief before the end of March. So far, according to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, only \$90 million has been pledged, barely two percent of the total needed.

As outlined by UN officials, the populations most immediately at risk number 7.3 million in Yemen, 2.9 million in Somalia, 5 million in South Sudan, and 5.1 million in Nigeria, for a total of 20.3 million. The number of children suffering symptoms of acute malnutrition is estimated at 462,000 in Yemen, 185,000 in Somalia, 270,000 in South Sudan, and 450,000 in Nigeria, for a total of nearly 1.4 million.

While adverse weather conditions, particularly drought, are a contributing factor in the humanitarian disasters, the primary cause is civil war, in which each side is using food supplies as a weapon, deliberately starving the population of the “enemy.”

US-backed forces are guilty of such war crimes in all four countries, and it is American imperialism, the principal backer of the Saudi intervention in Yemen and the government forces in Somalia, South Sudan and Nigeria, which is principally responsible for the danger of famine and the growing danger of a colossal humanitarian disaster.

The worst-hit country is Yemen, where US-armed and directed military units from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf monarchies are at war with Houthi rebels who overthrew the US-installed president two years ago. Some 19 million people, two-thirds of the country’s population, are in need of humanitarian assistance.

The Saudi forces, which fight alongside Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, control the country’s major ports, including Aden and Hodeida, and are backed by US Navy units in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in imposing a blockade on the region controlled by the Houthis in the west and north of the country.

US forces operations range throughout the country, with drone missile strikes and occasional raids, like the disastrous attack on a village at the end of January in which at least 30 Yemeni civilians were killed, many of them small children, and one US Special Forces soldier was shot to death.

In Somalia, the protracted civil war between the US-backed government in Mogadishu and Al Shabab militias, who control most of the country’s south, has laid waste to a country which already suffered a devastating famine in 2011, and has been ravaged by civil war for most the past quarter-century.

At least half the country’s population, more than six million people, is in need of humanitarian aid, according to UN estimates. Drought conditions have killed off much of the country’s animal population. In Somalia, too, US military units continue to operate, carrying out Special Forces raids and drone missile strikes. There is also an extensive spillover of Somali refugees into neighboring Kenya, where another 2.7 million people are in need of humanitarian aid.

The civil war in South Sudan is a conflict between rival tribal factions of a US-backed regime that was created through Washington’s intervention into a long-running civil war in Sudan. After a US-brokered treaty and a referendum approving separation, South Sudan was established as a newly independent state in 2011.

Tribal conflicts within the new state have been exacerbated by drought, extreme poverty, and the struggle to control the country’s oil reserves, its one significant natural resource, which is largely exported through neighboring Sudan to China. The country is landlocked, making transport of emergency food supplies more difficult.

The crisis in South Sudan was said to be the most acute of the four countries where famine alerts were being sounded, with some 40 percent of the population facing starvation. Last month, UN officials declared a full-scale famine alert for 100,000 people in South Sudan. A cholera epidemic has also been reported.

The famine crisis in Nigeria is likewise the byproduct of warfare, this time between the Islamic fundamentalist group Boko Haram and the government of Nigeria, which has military support from the US and Britain. The focal point of this conflict has been the Lake Chad region, where Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger share borders. This is the most densely populated and fertile of the four areas threatened with famine.

A recent offensive by Nigerian government forces pushed back Boko Haram and uncovered the extent of the suffering among the local population in the region, where food supplies were cut off as part of the US-backed military campaign.

US military forces range throughout the Sahel region, the vast area on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert which encompasses much of western Africa. The armed forces of French and German imperialism are also active in former French colonies like Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as further south, in the Central African Republic.

According to the UN reports, the humanitarian disaster in Yemen has accelerated in recent months. The number of Yemenis in immediate danger of starvation jumped from four million to seven million in the past month. One child dies every 10 minutes in Yemen from a preventable disease.

When the UN humanitarian chief's mission was in Yemen last week, it was able to secure safe passage for the first truckload of humanitarian supplies to the besieged city of Taiz, the country's third largest, which has been blockaded for the past seven months.

The debate on O'Brien's report to the UN Security Council featured one hypocritical statement after another by imperialist powers like the US, Britain, France, Japan and Italy, as well as by China and Russia, all bemoaning the suffering, but all concealing the real cause of the deepening crisis.

Typical were the remarks of the US representative, Michele Sison, who declared, "Every member of the Security Council should be outraged that the world was confronting famine in the year 2017. Famine is a man-made problem with a man-made solution."

She called on the parties engaged in fighting in the four countries to "prioritize access to civilians" and "not obstruct aid"—although that is exactly what the US-backed forces are doing, particularly in Yemen, and to a lesser extent in the other three countries.

The UN report does not cover other humanitarian crises also classified by the World Food Program as "level three," the most serious, including Iraq, Syria, Central African Republic and the Philippines (the first three due to civil war, the last due to the impact of several Pacific

typhoons). Nor does it cover the devastating civil conflict in Libya or Afghanistan, ravaged by nearly 40 years of continuous warfare.

Nor does it review the worldwide total of people in acute need of food assistance, estimated at 70 million in 45 countries, according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network. This figure is up 40 percent since 2015, as a result of escalating civil wars, drought and other climate-driven events, and rising food prices.

The World Food Program experienced a shortfall in contributions of nearly one-third in 2016, receiving only \$5.9 billion from donors towards a total outlay of \$8.6 billion, forcing the agency to cut rations for refugees in Kenya and Uganda. Total unfunded humanitarian aid appeals came to \$10.7 billion in 2016, larger than the combined total of such appeals in 2012.

While these sums are gargantuan in terms of the need, they are a drop in the bucket compared to the resources squandered by the major powers on war and militarism. The total deficit in humanitarian aid amounts to less than three days' worth of global military spending. The \$4.4 billion in aid sought for the famine crisis is half of what the US Pentagon spends in a typical week.