

THE GEOPOLITICS OF HUNGER, 2000–2001

Hunger and Power

ACTION AGAINST HUNGER



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Foreword: Hunger and the New Humanitarianism

Barnett R. Rubin

On 24 June 1859, Jean-Henri Dunant, a Genevan traveling in northern Italy, watched as the armies of Napoleon III of France and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria butchered six thousand of each other's soldiers. When the Austrians abandoned the field, both armies left the wounded to die and the dead to rot, while peasants plundered the corpses. Dunant organized the women of the neighboring village of Castiglione to help tend the wounded. His powerful account of his experience, published three years later, led to the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The new humanitarianism was born in the ICRC hospitals of Biafra. In September 1968, the French Red Cross Society lent the ICRC a team of five French doctors to care for the victims of the war in Biafra, the name given by leaders of the Ibo ethnic group of Nigeria to the new state they wished to found through secession from Nigeria. The French doctors' team, soon joined by doctors from other countries, set up two hospitals. In one, in the tradition of Dunant, they treated the war wounded, though they were shocked to find that most of the wounded seemed to be civilians, and notably a large number of children. At the other hospital they treated a new kind of war victim: malnourished children, starving not from a natural disaster but from hunger intentionally inflicted on innocents as an act of war against a whole people. Despite the ICRC's code of silence, considered necessary to assure unimpeded access to all victims, one of the doctors, Bernard Kouchner, asked himself: "What use were doctors if they did not warn the world about the murderous use of a food blockade as a weapon of war? If we remained

silent, we would be accomplices to the systematic massacre of a population."²

Just as classic humanitarianism was founded to ensure that soldiers wounded in battles between states were cared for as human beings, the new humanitarianism was founded to challenge the use of violence against noncombatants in civil wars. Under the slogan soigner et témoigner (provide care and bear witness), Doctors Without Borders was created in 1972. Other organizations followed suit. This volume, with its extensive testimony drawn from the experience of its aid workers in thirty-six countries around the world, shows that Action Against Hunger, founded in 1979 to fight hunger worldwide, has upheld and expanded this new movement.

In the world in which the ICRC was founded, wars pitted uniformed soldiers of recognized states against each other. The business of killing and maiming was pursued without quarter, and cruelty was accepted as the task of warriors, but the carnage was confined to those under arms. The warrior profession was inspired by a common code of honor, and despite their political antipathies, men were bound by the profession of arms in a kind of solidarity that transcended borders. The ICRC counted on that code and solidarity and on the recognition of a common interest in humanitarian standards to make its confidential interventions effective. We should not romanticize those days: No code of honor saved the victims of colonial wars and extermination campaigns in Africa, Asia, or the Americas. The Nazi regime abjured the very idea of a common humanity and showed the results of systematic antihumanitarianism. In response, the postwar Geneva Conventions (1948) codified basic humanitarian obligations in wartime and made adherence to its conventions a mark of sovereignty.

In the massive violence of postcolonial and post-Cold War civil conflict, however, the worst traditions of total war have returned. Biafra, the first postcolonial war of secession, was only a taste of what was to come. In the immediate postcolonial euphoria, international efforts and postcolonial states focused on "development" as the means to abolish poverty and hunger, considered as remnants of colonial exploitation. Famine resulted, it seemed, from a combination of natural disasters and mass poverty.

Biafra taught otherwise: Hunger was a weapon of war. In total wars where the aim is to subordinate, expel, or eliminate a whole population, control of food, as the reports in this book amply demonstrate, becomes the means of choice to impose submission, flight, or death. As a result, even peacetime economic decisions about food production can no longer be considered, alas, solely in the light of

economic rationality. An economically rational division of labor that leaves populations dependent on purchased food while they concentrate on cash crops may leave them vulnerable to later assault by those who control roads, ports, or a few marketplaces. Control of food is an aspect of security. Many warriors in today's conflicts recognize no code. Rulers employ private militias to insulate themselves from responsibility. Both they and the rebels may be answerable to no one but the criminal syndicates that market the commodities that fund their war, whether these are looted diamonds or illegal drugs. Humanitarian assistance itself is seen only as another weapon of war: supplies to be stolen for their troops or manipulated to starve the "enemy."

Self-interest may lead such leaders to allow humanitarian access, but the rising toll among humanitarian workers and journalists bearing witness shows the intentional violation of standards by the new warlords. To expose and oppose such crimes, including those masquerading as natural disasters or poverty, those present in the field have a duty to alert the wider public and call for international action beyond the humanitarian response. As the reports in this book show, these deeply committed workers are better placed than anyone to elucidate the complex ways in which the basic human need for food can be manipulated to diminish and destroy humanity. In this book, the humanitarians of Action Against Hunger present us, the international community, with overwhelming evidence of how hunger is used as a weapon of war. It is for us now to assume the responsibilities these testimonies have given us.

Notes

Barnett R. Rubin was director, Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations. He now works at the Center for International Cooperation of New York University.

- 1. Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), pp. 109-124.
- 2. "A quoi servaient les médecins s'ils n'alertaient pas le monde sur l'usage assassin du blocus alimentaire comme arme de guerre? Silencieux, nous étions complices du massacre systématique d'une population." Bernard Kouchner, *Le malheur des autres* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1993), pp. 57–69.

Preface

Sir Ronald Grierson Chairman, Action Against Hunger-UK Burton K. Haimes Chairman, Action Against Hunger—USA

Founded in France some twenty years ago with the aim of combating hunger and advocating the legal right to food (as stated in the United Nations Charter of 1945), Action Against Hunger is now firmly established in Paris, Spain (Madrid), the United Kingdom (London), and the United States (New York). As the twenty-first century begins, hunger is still a reality in many parts of the world.

It is indeed a sad state of affairs that we are entering a new century of technology and globalization, a century of the Internet and information, while such deleterious human conditions persist.

The end of the Cold War took us all by surprise. In the last ten years we have failed to see the realization of the hopes raised at the beginning of the 1990s. Absent the balance of power or balance of terror, local and regional conflicts have multiplied, and the number of civilian victims is growing. Nevertheless, progress has been made.

We are no longer impotent witnesses to remote natural disasters in India, Bangladesh, or China. Droughts, hurricanes, El Niño, and earthquakes continue to claim their share of lives, but not as a result of hunger. "Green Revolutions" and disaster response mechanisms have proven their effectiveness. The speed of information sharing and increased global agricultural yields, coupled with the experience and skills of relief organizations, enable us to defeat hunger when a natural disaster occurs. In theory, death by starvation due to natural disasters should not occur. Hunger can no longer be seen merely as the result of natural occurrences.

And yet, Action Against Hunger continues to see widespread hunger even as the world produces more than enough food for all. This paradox is analyzed in this book, our second report on global issues of hunger. The book gathers together the analyses and testimonies of Action Against Hunger field-workers with contributions from experts and academics, but it is neither a directory of world hunger nor a country-by-country description of the different forms of malnutrition afflicting each. Rather, in this book we explore the use of hunger as a weapon in food crises from Sierra Leone to North Korea; we study the different humanitarian strategies being used to confront unjust food distribution and to avoid manipulation in increasingly complicated contexts where neutrality and impartiality should be the permanent criteria of humanitarian action.

The Kosovo crisis of 1999 showed us that, even when public generosity is combined with the professionalism of humanitarian organizations, we are not free of manipulation. From the legitimization of war to cynical strategies that use discrimination in the distribution of food to displace populations, the Kosovo crisis has highlighted the need for independent humanitarian organizations concerned only with the fate of civilian victims not to be hindered by any political, military, or strategic agenda.

The Geopolitics of Hunger, 2000–2001 is divided into three parts. Part 1 deals with current crises, from the Congo to Somalia and from Nicaragua to Afghanistan and Sierra Leone. It shows that whoever controls food controls power. In Part 2, we seek an answer to a daily concern: how to react when confronted by criminal regimes. What are the principles to be respected and the code of conduct to be followed? What is the role of humanitarian organizations in the present world of international relations? Part 3 analyzes policies that could be implemented to secure the right to food.

Without international recognition of such a right and the establishment of policies, laws, and mechanisms to ensure its application, we are condemned to witness people dying of hunger in a world of plenty, a world in which food supplies are more than sufficient but distribution remains scandalously discriminatory.

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PART ONE

FOOD CRISES: HUNGER AS A WEAPON

He who controls the food supply wields the power. Hunger remains a weapon throughout the world, and certain populations are the victims of deliberate discriminatory practices that are intended to bring about their subjugation, their departure, or the arrival of the international community. In this sense, great famines are always the consequence of human action, even when the point of departure is a natural catastrophe.

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Sierra Leone: Food at the Heart of the Conflict

Pascal Lefort

In Sierra Leone, civilian populations have been the main victims of the civil war that the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) has been waging since 1991. Food, which has always been used as a political weapon in the country, has gradually become a key factor in the conflict. Used to legitimize the actions of both the government and the rebellion, food also represents a vital resource in the war economy. For its part, the RUF has frequently used hunger and terror as weapons with which to subjugate populations or force political dialogue.

Food and Terror

After being driven out of Freetown by ECOMOG (the Economic Community of West Africa States [ECOWAS] Monitoring Group) forces in February 1998, RUF fighters and the rebel soldiers of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) took less than two months to reorganize. Still lacking the military means for a direct confrontation with ECOMOG, the rebels fell back on the two weapons of terror and food that they had previously used to subjugate the civilian population and paralyze agricultural production.

Starting in April 1998, the rebels, who had retreated to their strongholds in the northeast, launched a campaign of terror in the north of the country to brutally refute the government's communiqués announcing victory. ECOMOG had concentrated its efforts on recapturing the towns and controlling the main roadways, thus mak-

	Chronology			
27 April 1961	Sierra Leone achieves independence.			
1968	Siaka Stevens gains power.			
1985	Siaka Stevens hands power over to his chief of staff, General Joseph Momoh.			
23 March 1991	First Revolutionary United Front (RUF) offensive in the Kailahun district, Eastern province.			
29 April 1992	Military coup d'état. Captain Valentine Strasser takes power at the head of the National People Revolutionary Council.			
16 January 1996	Valentine Strasser is "gently" overthrown by General Julius Maada Bio, who promises to set the path for a transition to democracy.			
15 March 1996	Ahmad Tehan Kabbah is democratically elected president of Sierra Leone.			
26 March 1996	Cease-fire agreement between the RUF and the armed forces of Sierra Leone.			
25 May 1997	Military coup d'état. President Kabbah flees to Guinea. Establishment of a military junta, the Armed Forces Ruling Council, led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma.			
28–29 August 1997	Economic Community of West African States summit in Abuja. Embargo imposed on Sierra Leone.			
23 October 1997	Conakry Accords (Guinea) provide for the return to power of President Kabbah on 22 April 1998.			
6 February 1998	Launch of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group's offensive on Freetown. Flight of junta.			
10 March 1998	Return of President Kabbah to Freetown.			
6 January 1999	Revolutionary United Front attacks Freetown.			
18 May 1999	Cease-fire agreement between the RUF and the Government of Sierra Leone.			
7 July 1999	Signing at Lomé of peace agreement between the RUF and the government of Sierra Leone.			
May 2000	The peace agreement is de facto broken and the RUF holds several hundred UN peacekeepers hostage.			

ing the rural areas an ideal target. Organized in small commando units, the combatants attacked isolated villages, following a well-practiced routine: looting, atrocities, and the burning of houses, all carried out in such a way as to ensure maximum effect. They inflicted mutilations, for example, that left permanent scars on victims and their families. For the farming population, a person's loss of one or sometimes two hands meant that the victim would no longer be able to provide for the needs of his or her family. To maximize the impact, victims were chosen at random, and there was no hesitation to amputate the limbs of very young children or to draw lots to decide which victims would have their limbs amputated.

This zone, which includes much of the Northern province, is the country's rice granary. The consequences of the atrocities committed were immediate: farming ceased, large numbers of people were displaced (150,000 people sought refuge in Guinea to escape the savagery and hunger), and the sale of cereals in the villages was restricted in preparation for the scarce times ahead. Within a few weeks the region was paralyzed, and the country's stocks of cereal declined precipitously. Because of the insecurity and the violence that they had suffered in the past, humanitarian organizations confined their activities to the towns and to areas along the main roadways that were protected by ECOMOG. During 1998, access to the population diminished as the security situation worsened, even as humanitarian needs increased.

When the RUF recaptured the mining town of Koidu in December 1998 and launched an offensive that took it to Freetown in a few weeks, Action Against Hunger teams were forced to abandon Makeni, capital of the Northern province. At the time, 700 severely malnourished children were being treated in our therapeutic nutrition centers.

Since January 1999, one and a half million people have been deprived of humanitarian assistance in the rebel-controlled northern half of the country. The first evaluation missions led by Action Against Hunger in June 1999 and reports from people who had recently returned from Makeni confirmed the acute shortages of food and medicine.³ Because of the shortage of paddy (rice), very little has been planted. Only the populations living near the border with Guinea have access to food supplies on a more regular basis.

Right up to the start of peace negotiations in May 1999, the fate of these populations was of little concern to either the government or the RUF, who were less interested in managing the territory under their control than in exploiting the wealth that fed their war economy.

Food in the Service of the War Economy

The diamond industry and the importation of food are closely linked in Sierra Leone. Through a subtle compensation mechanism, these