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Record number of people worldwide are moving toward starvation, U.N. warns

July 7, 2022 · 2:15 AM ET

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Sergei, 11, waits his turn to receive donated food during an aid humanitarian distribution in Bucha, in the outskirts of Kyiv, on Tuesday, April 19, 2022.

Emilio Morenatti/AP

UNITED NATIONS — The spike in food, fuel and fertilizer prices sparked by the war in Ukraine is threatening to push countries around the world into famine, bringing "global destabilization, starvation and mass migration on an unprecedented scale," a top U.N. official warned Wednesday.

David Beasley, head of the U.N. World Food Program, said its latest analysis shows that "a record 345 million acutely hungry people are marching to the brink of starvation" — a 25% increase from 276 million at the start of 2022 before Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. The number stood at 135 million before the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

"There's a real danger it will climb even higher in the months ahead," he said. "Even more worrying is that when this group is broken down, a staggering 50 million people in 45 countries are just one step away from famine."



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How The War In Ukraine Is Deepening The World's Hunger Crisis

Beasley spoke at a high-level U.N. meeting for the release of the latest report on global hunger by the World Food Program and four other U.N. agencies that paints a grim picture.

The report, "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World," says world hunger rose in 2021, with around 2.3 billion people facing moderate or severe difficulty obtaining enough to eat. The number facing severe food insecurity increased to about 924 million.

The prevalence of "undernourishment" — when food consumption is insufficient to maintain an active and healthy life — is used to measure hunger, and it continued to rise in 2021. The report estimates that between 702 million and 828 million people faced hunger last year.

Beasley said in live virtual comments that the impact of the conflict in Ukraine, "the bread basket of the world," on global food availability and food security "means the number of chronically hungry people in the world is likely already much higher than the 828 million."

Before the war, Ukraine and Russia together accounted for almost a third of the world's wheat and barley exports and half of its sunflower oil. Russia and its ally Belarus, meanwhile, are the world's No. 2 and 3 producers of potash, a key ingredient of fertilizer.

Beasley called for an urgent political solution that would allow Ukrainian wheat and grain to re-enter global markets.



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He also urged substantial new funding for humanitarian groups to deal with "the skyrocketing levels of hunger," governments to resist protectionism and keep trade flowing, and investments to help the poorest countries protect themselves against hunger and other shocks.

"If we had successfully threaded this needle in the past, the war in Ukraine wouldn't be having such a disastrous global impact today," Beasley said.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has been trying to put together a package that would enable Ukraine to resume exporting wheat and other commodities and Russia to ship grain and fertilizer to world markets. U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Wednesday that discussions are continuing.

Issued by the World Food Program, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, U.N. Children's Fund, World Health Organization and International Fund for Agricultural Development, the report says the 2021 statistics make clear "the world is moving backwards in its efforts to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms."

The heads of the five agencies say in the report that in addition to the disruptions to supply chains from the war in Ukraine that are driving up food prices, more frequent and extreme climate events are also causing supply problems, especially in low-income countries.

The report says hunger kept rising last year in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, but at a slower pace than from 2019 to 2020.

"In 2021, hunger affected 278 million people in Africa, 425 million in Asia and 56.5 million in Latin America and the Caribbean," it said.

U.N. development goals call for ending extreme poverty and having zero hunger by 2030, but the report says projections indicate that 8% of the world's population — nearly 670 million people — will be facing hunger at the end of the decade. That is the same number of people as in 2015 when the goals were adopted.

The gender gap in food insecurity, which grew during the pandemic, widened further last year, the report says. Driven largely by widening differences in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as in Asia, "31.9% of women in the world were moderately or severely food insecure compared to 27.6% of men" in 2021, it says.

Looking at the situation of the very young, the report estimates 22% of children under age 5 — about 149 million — had stunted growth and development, while 6.7% — 45 million — suffered from wasting, the deadliest form of malnutrition. At the other end of the scale, 5.7% of youngsters under 5, or 39 million, were overweight, it adds

The five agency chiefs said the intensification of the triple crises of climate, conflict and the pandemic combined with growing inequalities require "bolder action" to cope with future shocks.

Qu Dongyu , director-general of the Food and Agricultural Organization, called for countries to expand food production, strengthen supply chains to support small farmers, and provide cash and other critical items for cereal and vegetable production and to protect livestock.

"We are at serious risk of facing a food access crisis now, and probably a food availability crisis for the next season," he said. "We must prevent the acceleration of acute food insecurity trends in the coming months and years."

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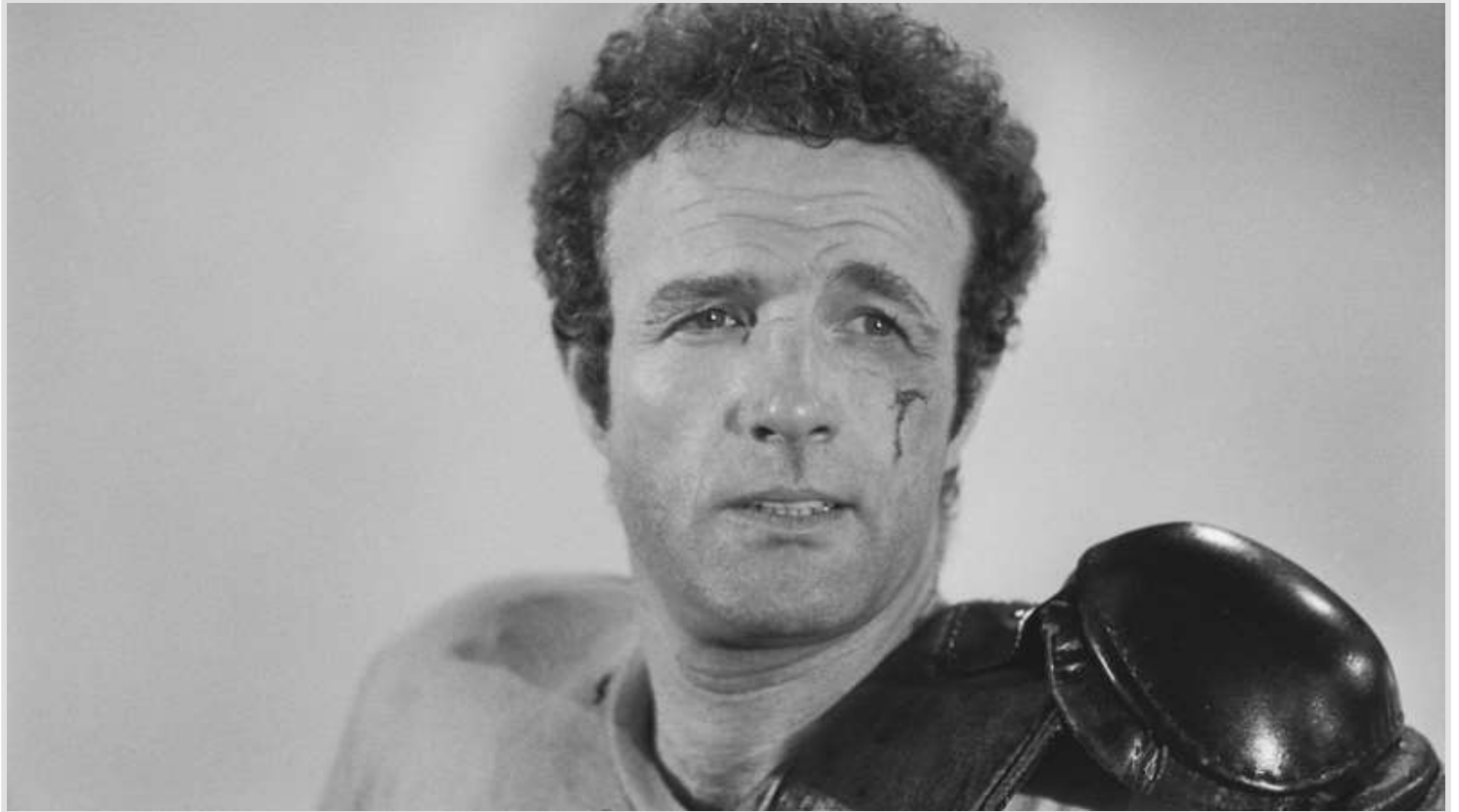
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