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First Famines of Coronavirus Era Are at World's Doorstep, U.N. Warns

By Rick Gladstone

7-9 minutes

The top U.N. relief official said parts of Yemen, South Sudan, northeast Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo are at risk, “endangering the lives of millions of women, men and children.”





Credit...Essa Ahmed/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The first famines of the coronavirus era could soon hit four chronically food-deprived conflict areas — Yemen, South Sudan, northeast Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo — the top humanitarian official of the United Nations has warned.

In a letter to members of the Security Council, the official, [Mark Lowcock](#), said the risk of famines in these areas had been intensified by “natural disasters, economic shocks and public-health crises, all compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.” Together, he said, “these factors are endangering the lives of millions of women, men and children.”

The letter, which has not been made public, was conveyed by Mr. Lowcock’s office to the Security Council on Friday under its 2018 resolution requiring updates when “the risk of conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity” occurs. A copy of the letter was seen by The New York Times.

United Nations officials have said before that all four areas are vulnerable to acute food deprivation because of chronic armed conflicts and the inability of humanitarian relief providers to freely distribute aid.

In April, David Beasley, the executive director of the World Food Program, the anti-hunger arm of the United Nations, warned the Security Council that while the world was contending with the coronavirus pandemic, [“we are also on the brink of a hunger](#)

[pandemic.](#)”

Mr. Lowcock, who is the United Nations’ under secretary for humanitarian affairs, effectively escalated the warning, saying a lack of funding for emergency relief and the complications created by the coronavirus scourge have now pushed some of the world’s neediest populations closer to famine conditions.

Under a monitoring system for assessing hunger emergencies known as the [Integrated Food Security Classification or IPC scale](#), Phase 3 is a crisis, Phase 4 is an emergency, and Phase 5 is famine — the worst — marked by “starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels.”

In Yemen, where [famine](#) was averted two years ago, Mr. Lowcock said “the risk is slowly returning.” The country, the poorest in the Arab world, has been ravaged for more than five years by a civil war between Houthi rebels and a Saudi-backed military coalition that has left 80 percent of the country dependent on outside aid.

Mr. Lowcock said the Yemeni currency has basically collapsed, while food costs have surged and drinking-water prices have more than doubled since April. In 16 districts of the country, nearly all in Houthi-controlled areas, he said, the hunger emergency is now at Phase 4 — one step from famine.

In the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where decades of conflict have worsened this year, Mr. Lowcock said 21 million people are living in “crisis or worse levels of food insecurity.”

[The Coronavirus Outbreak](#) ›

Frequently Asked Questions

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- **What are the symptoms of coronavirus?**
- In the beginning, the coronavirus [seemed like it was primarily a respiratory illness](#) — many patients had fever and chills, were weak and tired, and coughed a lot, though some people don't show many symptoms at all. Those who seemed sickest had pneumonia or acute respiratory distress syndrome and received supplemental oxygen. By now, doctors have identified many more symptoms and syndromes. In April, [the C.D.C. added to the list of early signs](#) sore throat, fever, chills and muscle aches. Gastrointestinal upset, such as diarrhea and nausea, has also been observed. Another telltale sign of infection may be a sudden, profound diminution of one's [sense of smell and taste](#). Teenagers and young adults in some cases have developed painful red and purple lesions on their fingers and toes — nicknamed “Covid toe” — but few other serious symptoms.
- **Why is it safer to spend time together outside?**
- [Outdoor gatherings](#) lower risk because wind disperses viral droplets, and sunlight can kill some of the virus. Open spaces prevent the virus from building up in concentrated amounts and being inhaled, which can happen when infected people exhale in a confined space for long stretches of time, said Dr. Julian W. Tang, a virologist at the University of Leicester.
- **Why does standing six feet away from others help?**
- The coronavirus spreads primarily through droplets from your mouth and nose, especially when you cough or sneeze. The

C.D.C., one of the organizations using that measure, [bases its recommendation of six feet](#) on the idea that most large droplets that people expel when they cough or sneeze will fall to the ground within six feet. But six feet has never been a magic number that guarantees complete protection. Sneezes, for instance, can launch droplets a lot farther than six feet, [according to a recent study](#). It's a rule of thumb: You should be safest standing six feet apart outside, especially when it's windy. But keep a mask on at all times, even when you think you're far enough apart.

- **I have antibodies. Am I now immune?**
- As of right now, [that seems likely, for at least several months](#). There have been frightening accounts of people suffering what seems to be a second bout of Covid-19. But experts say these patients may have a drawn-out course of infection, with the virus taking a slow toll weeks to months after initial exposure. People infected with the coronavirus typically [produce](#) immune molecules called antibodies, which are [protective proteins made in response to an infection. These antibodies may](#) last in the body [only two to three months](#), which may seem worrisome, but that's perfectly normal after an acute infection subsides, said Dr. Michael Mina, an immunologist at Harvard University. It may be possible to get the coronavirus again, but it's highly unlikely that it would be possible in a short window of time from initial infection or make people sicker the second time.
- **What are my rights if I am worried about going back to work?**

- Employers have to provide [a safe workplace](#) with policies that protect everyone equally. [And if one of your co-workers tests positive for the coronavirus, the C.D.C.](#) has said that [employers should tell their employees](#) -- without giving you the sick employee's name -- that they may have been exposed to the virus.

In the northeast Nigeria states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, which have been roiled for years by armed extremist militants, Mr. Lowcock said more than 10 million people — four of five — now require humanitarian assistance and protection.

He said more than 1.2 million people in northeast Nigeria “remain largely inaccessible to aid agencies due to conflict and deliberate obstruction by nonstate armed groups,” with more than 15 aid workers killed in the past year.

In South Sudan, which has been upended by seven years of civil war, a recent upsurge in violence has left more than 1.4 million people “facing crisis or worse levels of food insecurity,” Mr. Lowcock said. Two years after the threat of famine was narrowly averted in South Sudan, he said, “parts of the country are again deteriorating sharply.”