

BIGMUN 2025

Committee on World Food Security (CFS)

Research Report

Topic 1: Working towards combatting the starvation of civilians as an act of warfare



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Introduction

Starvation of civilians is an ancient method of warfare, recognised as early as 600 BC in Sun Tzu's "The Art of War".¹ It has been used throughout time due to its success in achieving military goals. It is cost-efficient for the oppressor and much more damaging for the enemy. In the 1977 Geneva Conventions this tactic was defined as a war crime. Still, it is being practised in modern warfare in places like the Middle East, Africa and Europe. This is why the topic will be discussed in our committee, possibly achieving a solution to tackle this issue.

This research report will give you necessary information on the issue. It will guide you by giving beneficial resources and past UN resolutions considering this topic. It will hopefully help you research this topic and create your own resolution during BIGMUN.

Definition of Key Terms

Starvation of civilians: Purposefully limiting food/water and other necessities of civilians in an occupied region to attain an advantage of the rival. It has been defined as a war crime.

War crime: Violation of international humanitarian law committed in warfare. These laws have been set in international treaties like the Geneva Conventions and Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Warfare: An active war/armed conflict. It can involve both organised military forces and irregular groups.

Famine: According to UNICEF, "*Famine is a severe scarcity of food, leading to extreme hunger and even starvation in a population.*"² People in famine suffer an absence of critical nutrients and therefore can die not only of hunger, but also sickness.

Background Information

Starvation of civilians is an ancient war tactic. It has long been seen as 'lawful' and has led to countless innocent casualties. Most notable instances in recent times are the Siege of

¹ "Starvation as a Weapon of War: A Timeline". *Global Rights Compliance*, <https://starvationaccountability.org/ratification-portal/timeline/> accessed 13/01/2024.

² "Famine" *UNICEF Australia*, <https://www.unicef.org.au/what-is-famine> accessed 27/12/2024.

Leningrad (1941-1944) leading to approximately 1.5 million civilian deaths and the Biafran famine (1967-1970) leading to over two million civilian deaths.

It has been practiced due to its effectiveness in achieving military goals. In the tactic, the oppressor has control over an enemy region, and restrict the civilians' access to essential resources, primarily food and water. It is a 'cheap weapon' meaning that the tactic doesn't cost much for the oppressor, while burning the resources of the enemy. It therefore successfully weakens the enemy and can break their resilience, forcing them to surrender.

In 1977 Additional Protocols were added to the Geneva Conventions, of which Article 54 stated "*Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.*"³ Even though it is now considered a war crime, it is still sadly practiced in warfare in places like Yemen, South Sudan, Palestine and Ukraine.

While the UN is trying to tackle this issue, the complexity of warfare makes criminal punishment a long and difficult process. This raises concern for more rigid enforcement of International Humanitarian Law in modern warfare.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Yemen – Since 2014 the Iran-allied Houthis opposing the Hadi government have been fighting the Saudi-allied Hadi supporters. UNHCR reported that "*4/5 Yemeni can't survive without outside aid, and 17 million people are on the brink of starvation*".⁴ They have stated the Yemen civil war to be the biggest ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Israel - Israeli officials have made public statements expressing their aim to deprive civilians in Gaza of food, water, and fuel. The military actions reflect their statements. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) reported that in December 2023, 9/10 households in Northern Gaza and 2/3 of households in Southern Gaza had spent at least 24 hours without food. The Norwegian Refugee Council has announced that Gaza is struggling with "*catastrophic water, sanitation, and hygiene needs*".⁵

³ "Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977." *ICRC IHL Databases*, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-54>

⁴ "Humanitarian crisis in Yemen" *Switzerland for UNHCR* <https://unrefugees.ch/en/emergencies/humanitarian-crisis-yemen>

⁵ "Israel: Starvation Used as Weapon of War in Gaza" *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza>

South Sudan – UN experts in Geneva have stated that “over 25 million civilians are being starved and require urgent humanitarian assistance because of the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This humanitarian assistance is being blocked, and the harvest season has been disrupted.⁶ Famine is spreading across the country and “is present in at least five areas”, reported by the IPC Famine Review Committee (FRC). Five additional areas are “expected to face famine between December 2024 and May 2025”.⁷

Russia - Russia has “deliberately destroyed aid distribution points and restricted the delivery of humanitarian aid”. It has blocked evacuation routes and bombed electricity stations leaving most food to spoil. The largest siege was on Mariupol “in early 2022, leaving citizens without access to food or safe drinking water”.⁸

World Food Programme (WFP) – The world’s largest humanitarian organisation, WFP, provides emergency food assistance in conflict zones and works to prevent famine.

There are many other organisations fighting towards ending hunger, which give aid to conflict zones. Some of these are:

- [Action Against Hunger](#)
- [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#)
- [Oxfam](#)
- [UNICEF](#)
- [CARE](#)

Relevant UN Resolutions

Resolution 2417 – The UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted this resolution in 2018. It discusses exactly topic 1, concerned with the “level of global humanitarian needs and the threat of famine presently facing millions of people in armed conflicts”. In the first subclause it states

⁶ “Using starvation as a weapon of war in Sudan must stop: UN experts” *United Nations Human Rights*, 2024 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/using-starvation-weapon-war-sudan-must-stop-un-experts> &

Sova, Chase. “Starvation Crimes and International Law: A New Era” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2024 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/starvation-crimes-and-international-law-new-era>

⁷ Mishra, Vibhu. “Sudan’s worsening famine: Conflict puts millions at risk” *United Nations News*, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158511>

⁸ Torres, Chef Andres. “Is hunger the deadliest weapon of modern conflict?” *euronews*, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/09/06/is-hunger-the-deadliest-weapon-of-modern-conflict>

“1. Recalls the link between armed conflict and violence and conflict-induced food insecurity and the threat of famine, and calls on all parties to armed conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law”

Resolution 1296 – Adopted by UNSC in 2000, this resolution discusses civilians affected by armed conflict. In the second subclause it states

“2. Reaffirms its strong condemnation of the deliberate targeting of civilians or other protected persons in situations of armed conflict, and calls upon all parties to put an end to such practices”

Resolution 1894 – Adopted by UNSC in 2009, this resolution is quite similar to Resolution 1296, discussing the same issue of targeting civilians in warfare.

Resolution 2175 – Adopted by UNSC in 2014. This resolution discusses how humanitarian personnel should be free and safe to help those in conflict areas. In subclause 4 it mentions that *“perpetrators of [unlawful acts listed in subclause 2.] are brought to justice, as provided for by national laws and obligations under international law”*.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

1949 Geneva Convention: The conference set the base for International Humanitarian Laws (IHL), referred to as the laws of armed conflict. The Convention, for example, mentions that humanitarian aid should be allowed for prisoners of war and civilians.

1977 Geneva Convention: As beforementioned, this convention decided additional protocols, of which the first subclause of Article 54 stated *“1. Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.”*

Rome statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC): In 1998 the ICC discussed the IHL and criminal jurisdiction following a breach of them. In Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) they specifically call back on the 1977 Geneva Convention and define the following as a war crime custom to jurisdiction.

“Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions”.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening legal frameworks and enhancing criminal punishment

- It is currently an issue that many of those who commit war crimes aren't held accountable for their actions. Even if they are held accountable, the damage they have done usually outweighs their repercussions. This is the main reason why this tactic is still being used, because in the end, the oppressor wins.
- A resolution can be passed which calls for an additional protocol to the Geneva Conventions. Such a protocol could ensure that participants in war crimes are easier to be held accountable and that their repercussions are harsh.

Increased funding for existing organisations giving aid to civilians in conflict

- The organisations helping areas struck by food insecurity often mention that they are in need of additional funding to be able to give proper aid to all civilians.
- If the UN can increase funding for some of their organisations like WFP and UNICEF, they can ensure that less civilians have to suffer starvation.

Training personnel to protect civilians from attacks and humanitarian workers

- In theory, if those civilians who are targeted are protected by those who are military trained, they could be protected in the case of breaches to human rights. These trained personnel could ensure that food and water sources and electricity stations are not destroyed by the enemy, and help humanitarian personnel get through.
- These personnel can ensure that other war crimes such as murder and rape are not being committed. They would be urged to not provoke unnecessary violence, but only to self-defend.

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