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U.S. Aid Cuts Make Famine More Likely and Easier to Hide

The Trump administration has put a 90-day hold on most U.S. foreign aid, with devastating effects on the system built over decades for preventing famine. The result may be more and deadlier famines, with greater impunity for parties using starvation as a weapon of war.

For decades, the United States has been a driving force of global efforts to battle food insecurity and famine, but now the second Donald Trump administration has put that legacy in jeopardy. The risk of more frequent and deadlier famines – situations of food insecurity so extreme that at least two of every ten thousand people in the affected areas die from starvation or disease every day – is likely to tick up after the administration moved to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and slash U.S. foreign aid budgets. The administration's decision to gut the agency overseeing most U.S. humanitarian funding will have many consequences, including for Washington's "soft power" around the world. But it also threatens the sophisticated machinery built over decades to detect, prevent and mitigate famine at a time when many populations face growing food insecurity and conflict parties increasingly use starvation as a weapon of war.

The cuts' effects are already visible. The front-line response to famine in Sudan has been devastated, while the formerly USAID-funded famine early warning project is sitting idle. Other parts of the international system tasked with warning of and declaring famines have the benefit of UN or other financing, but they may still suffer collateral damage. The global aid sector, meanwhile, has taken a battering, with the budget gaps the Trump administration's action has abruptly created leading to layoffs at numerous organisations. The United Kingdom and some continental European states have also reduced aid allocations, making it look unlikely that other traditional donors will fill the void left by the withdrawal of U.S. funding.

Whether or not there is a consistent causal link between rising hunger and conflict, privation can roil national politics and spark violence, such as when high food prices set off riots that brought down the Haitian government in 2008. Famines helped topple the Afghan monarchy in 1973 and the Ethiopian emperor the following year. Mass starvation can also be weaponised in conflict settings. For example, during its 2014-2018 campaign to retake rebel-held rural areas, the government of South Sudan starved entire populations in these parts of the country by destroying or looting livestock, food and other necessities, as well as blockading some communities while displacing the residents of others en masse. From 2012 through 2018, the Assad regime in Syria repeatedly besieged cities and neighbourhoods until rebel forces agreed to withdraw in its "surrender or starve" campaign.

Given the misery and risks that famines bring, knowing about them in advance is important for both humanitarian agencies and all with an interest in peace and security. But the U.S. funding cuts could mean that emerging famines will be hidden from view.

Slashing Aid Budgets

The Trump administration took steps to halt U.S. foreign aid on its first day in office. Project 2025 – a policy blueprint for the administration that (despite Trump's disclaimers) has clearly influenced its decisions – called for dramatic changes at USAID, but the president and his advisers went much further. An executive order issued by Trump on 20 January stated that the U.S. foreign aid bureaucracy and the associated industry "are not aligned with American interests" and "destabilise world peace". It called for a 90-day pause in U.S. foreign development assistance. The administration quickly took steps to implement the order, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio putting a hold on new foreign aid awards and instructing U.S. officials to issue stop-work orders for all existing aid commitments. By 4 February, USAID had notified its work force that everyone would be placed on administrative leave beginning on 8 February, with limited exceptions. While Rubio's order contained a waiver for "emergency food assistance", and he later issued another for disbursements under existing "humanitarian assistance programs", U.S. officials running aid programs faced challenges in releasing funds – including because USAID's payments system, known as Phoenix, was inaccessible.

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The Trump administration's actions have been the subject of intense legal contestation. On 13 February, a federal district court judge ordered the administration to temporarily lift the funding freeze and barred the secretary of state and other officials from enforcing the stop-work orders sent to organisations and companies delivering aid on USAID's behalf. In turn, the Trump administration cancelled almost 10,000 of 13,000 previously awarded USAID and State Department contracts. The district court judge then determined that the administration was not complying with his 13 February order, mandating that the government make billions in payments by midnight on 26 February. The administration appealed to the Supreme Court, and before the midnight deadline, Chief Justice John Roberts placed a hold on the judge's order to pause the freeze while the court reviews the case, with a ruling expected by 28 February. A separate judgment directed the Trump administration to temporarily halt plans to put most USAID staff on leave, but by 21 February the court had removed this block, resulting in more than 6,000 USAID employees being terminated or placed on administrative leave.

The atmosphere of uncertainty has resulted in a massive constriction of humanitarian aid, with aid agencies and NGOs drastically cutting, or completely suspending, programming and staff contracts. As a result, the global system for preventing and responding to famine is rapidly coming unglued.

Famine, Modern Conflict and U.S. Foreign Policy

Famine warning and relief has long been a priority for U.S. humanitarian assistance, not least because of the cascade of devastation that famine brings. Stuck in a situation that some have called "societal torture", people who cannot get enough to eat eventually experience starvation, an extreme form of malnutrition, which weakens immune systems, often leading to mass death from starvation and ghastly epidemic disease. The youngest and the oldest are usually famine's first victims and often die in large numbers. Social structures break down as people are

forced to compete for any remaining resources and cultural norms give way to a moral "grey zone". Women and children may be forced into prostitution, early or unwanted marriage or other exploitative situations in exchange for survival; in some cultures, women eat last and least at mealtimes, making them disproportionately affected when food becomes scarce. Families may fragment as members leave in search of food or abandon the household. The resulting trauma and health effects can last for generations.

For a brief moment in the 2000s, some thought the world had beaten famine, thanks to a half-century of preventive efforts and the end of the Cold War. Yet mass starvation and famine struck repeatedly in the subsequent decade, in part because belligerents and their patrons saw them as a means of attaining political and battlefield objectives. (Mass starvation can occur without mass death, while famine is typically defined by the large-scale, rapid loss of life due to starvation and its interaction with disease.) Today, conflict parties may try to drive populations into starvation by burning crops, destroying food storage facilities, systematically obstructing aid delivery and forcing mass displacement. These tactics can create conditions for famine while maintaining plausible deniability for those causing it, particularly when no neutral party documents what is happening.

Since 2019, food insecurity has surged worldwide, driven by the growing use of starvation as a weapon of war and worsening environmental factors such as climate change that exacerbate food shortages. Human rights organisations and others have alleged the weaponised use of starvation by an al-Qaeda affiliate in the Sahel, Israel in its siege of Gaza in 2023 and both main parties in Sudan's civil war in 2024. As of early February 2025, famine had likely just been averted (or stopped) in Gaza, as a fragile ceasefire came into effect, but was widening in Sudan. Other countries showed clear signs of moving toward greater privation and increased risk of famine: the elite bargains holding South Sudan's political system together were cracking under the pressure of macro-economic crisis and the Sudanese war, pointing to the danger of a violent breakdown and life-threatening food insecurity, while conflicts in Haiti and Mali had already led to starvation in some areas. Plausible scenarios for similar mass starvation or famine loom in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria and elsewhere.

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Traditionally, international actors would look to the United States to counter this trend. For more than a century, the U.S. has heavily underwritten the effort to fight famine. The U.S. government's relief mission to Europe after World War I helped deliver the equivalent in today's dollars of $15 billion worth of food and other necessities. At its 1921 peak, the program was feeding over 11 million people a day. After World War II, which caused famine in numerous countries, the U.S. saw famine as a direct threat to security as well as its newly strengthened position of global influence. Herbert Hoover, a former president and former head of the European relief mission, conducted a worldwide tour of famine-stricken locales on behalf of President Harry Truman in 1946. Upon his return, he called famine prevention "the only path to order, to stability and peace", setting up the next 80 years of food and agricultural assistance as a persistent feature of U.S. foreign policy.

Under Cold War-era programs, the U.S. distributed excess agricultural produce to friendly or struggling countries, hoping to bolster its allies and ward off communist influence. Politicians saw humanitarian and especially food aid as a way to project U.S. influence and power; some also saw it as a moral imperative. In the second half of the 20th century, Washington channelled political capital toward famine prevention by helping set up some of the world's better-known humanitarian organisations, such as UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP); playing a leading role at the first World Food Conference in 1974; and establishing its own famine early warning project in 1985, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET).

From the 1990s until today, the U.S. provided much of the financial backing for a largely Western-funded and UN-led humanitarian system designed to detect, prevent and treat the effects of famine. U.S. institutions and the wider humanitarian system grew to recognise that averting and ending famine requires a surge in public health, nutrition and other technical support, not just bags of grain. The U.S. heavily funded the various components of the apparatus for fighting famine, from food production to research and innovation.

U.S. security policy has not always been synchronised with its humanitarian relief policies. Washington occasionally ignored famine or, by dint of its actions, increased the risk of famine, even as USAID and other

government organs tried to prevent or ameliorate it. During the Cold War, the U.S. sometimes withheld food aid to strong-arm countries facing famine to stop trading or aligning with communist states. Examples include Bangladesh in 1974 and Ethiopia in 1984, although Washington eventually relented in the latter case under domestic and international pressure. More recently, U.S. counter-terrorism policies aimed at weakening the Al-Shabaab insurgency blocked the flow of aid to Somalia in 2011 despite clear, timely early warning for famine – which did in fact ensue, killing an estimated 258,000 people. Following Hamas's 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel, Washington continued sending arms to Israel and defending it in diplomatic forums, even as the Israeli campaign in the Gaza Strip resulted in mass starvation and possibly famine.

Losing Sight of Famine

The Trump aid cuts have imperilled the two main institutions with a global remit that work together to alert the world to famine risk and identify famines. One of these is an early warning system funded directly by the U.S., while the other is a UN-coordinated network that relies in part on U.S. funding and expertise.

Of the two, the hardest hit is FEWS NET, which ran with U.S. funds but operated mostly independently until the stop-work order forced it offline. The project provided prolific early warning analysis of food security and famine, publishing more than ten times as much in 2024 as UN-led efforts produced in about the same number of countries. It did not have a perfect record – it misread the risk that conflict would cause famine in South Sudan in 2020, and it succumbed to U.S. political pressure in removing from public view a famine warning about Gaza in 2024. Yet it was a generally rich, adaptive and authoritative source, and it often provided warning or confirmation of famine in circumstances when no other organisation could or would do so. FEWS NET played a major role in most of the UN declarations of famine in the last two decades, including in Somalia in 2011, Nigeria in 2016 and Sudan in 2024.

The FEWS NET project also linked up the expertise of U.S. government agencies and U.S. universities in its science partner network, for instance bringing the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and U.S. Geological Survey together with the Climate Hazards Center of the University of California-Santa Barbara to produce analysis of global food insecurity. The status of this network is not yet clear, though pieces of it like NOAA, a world leader in forecasting major climatic events that have in the past been linked to famine, such as La Nina and El Nino, seem to be on the chopping block.

The second institution under threat – albeit less directly – is the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). The IPC is a UN-coordinated body as well as an analytical framework for classifying life-threatening food insecurity and famine. Founded in 2004, the IPC is the only internationally recognised system for warning of famine and declaring its onset. FEWS NET helped develop the IPC framework over the years, including by providing the initial methodology for building the scenarios at the heart of the IPC's output. Unlike at FEWS NET, analysis under the IPC's aegis is mostly produced by national bodies usually co-led by UN agencies and national governments.

While highly valuable, the IPC's work is often insufficient on its own, especially for countries in conflict. As a series of investigations and studies have found, the IPC is highly vulnerable to political interference. In Sudan, the army prevented that country's national IPC body from using hard evidence of probable famine in Darfur for about six months in 2024, while FEWS NET faced no such obstacle. The IPC can also be evicted by a national government, as it was in Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan after releasing contentious analysis of famine risk and occurrence. It was therefore important that FEWS NET released its own products independently, often serving as a counterweight to IPC analysis.

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While the IPC only received a portion of its funding from USAID, it will suffer indirectly, as the impact of U.S. funding cuts at other organisations will likely impair the data collection that makes IPC analysis possible, particularly the household surveys undertaken by UN agencies like WFP and UNICEF and non-profits like the REACH Initiative. Funding cuts will also likely result in the loss of specialist staff, limiting the pool of analysts available to participate in the IPC's work. Without sufficient funding for data collection and expertise, the IPC will cease to function as a warning system.

Linked to the IPC is the Famine Review Committee, the world's only recognised body for declaring famine, which reviews IPC and FEWS NET famine analysis. The committee operates mostly voluntarily, although funding cuts have curtailed the work of some of its members including several U.S. and British academics. The U.S. may also cede its influence in the committee through federal work force cuts if these remove the government employee who serves on it.

Together, FEWS NET and the IPC helped the world "see" famine by making legible what was previously a mash of data on food consumption, acute malnutrition, mortality, displacement and other topics. They also injected greater objectivity into investigations of what was too often treated as a fundamentally political question – whether famine was impending or occurring in a particular place – providing technical framing and empirical assessments amid rampant disinformation, biased narratives and outright denial. Before these institutions came into being, famines could go largely unnoticed internationally, as they did in Afghanistan in the 1970s, Madagascar in the 1980s and southern Sudan in the 1990s. A state or armed group could allege a famine or deny one without a more objective body available to assess those claims or offer evidenced-based analysis. Through early warning, these systems also helped fend off famine in Somalia during that country's 2016-2017 drought, and they contributed to pressure on the Saudi-led coalition to stop its campaign to take the Yemeni port city of Hodeida in 2018-2019. With major parts of the global system gone or diminished, future famines may again become invisible, making them more attractive as tools of politics and war.

A Grim New Normal

The dismantling of USAID represents more than just a retreat in foreign assistance. It threatens infrastructure built over decades that, among other things, has served as a means of mitigating the most brutal effects of conflict.

It also suggests a turn in U.S. politics away from seeing foreign aid as a form of soft power-enhancing "enlightened self-interest" toward a more transactional theory of international relations. As U.S. diplomats told the WFP executive board on 18 February, "the United States is no longer going to dole out money with no return for the American people". Regardless of the humanitarian outcomes, this shift may augur a major reallocation of U.S. and other aid from countries seen as peripheral to the strategic interests of big and middle powers. Extending this logic, it is too easy to imagine a world in which the U.S. and other wealthy countries dangle food assistance before governments of poorer countries in exchange for concessions like access to mineral wealth or tighter restrictions on migration. Adversaries, or simply the insufficiently aligned, could be left out in the cold, while civilians suffer famine and other preventable tragedies. Such a reversion to Cold War-era logic could make geopolitics the strongest predictor of famine, supporting a Ronald Reagan administration official's judgment that it is "naive to assume that food aid has as its major purpose the alleviation of hunger and poverty".

With the bipartisan consensus around famine prevention subsumed by bigger political trends, efforts to restore or rebuild U.S. capacity will probably have to start with the basics: convincing the U.S. public and government that foreign aid is worthy of federal funding. Support for such assistance, especially food aid, endures among some Republican politicians, and several have begun trying to salvage basic food aid programs – with a focus on those that buy U.S. agricultural commodities in bulk in Republican-leaning states. But whether their entreaties will be enough to persuade the administration to reinstate at least some of what it has cut remains to be seen. If not, then restoration will have to be a longer-term project.

The consequences of the Trump administration's moves are already unfolding.

Meanwhile, the consequences of the Trump administration's moves are already unfolding. One immediate result of disrupting the famine prevention architecture will be an accountability vacuum in war zones where reliable information might have constrained the weaponisation of starvation. Such a vacuum could too easily accelerate a grim trend: the deliberate use of starvation as a tool of war, with diminishing international ability to document, prevent or respond effectively. More broadly, the net result of losing capacity to detect and respond to famine could well be a bleak revisiting of the past. Famines as defined by the IPC measures, adopted only twenty years ago, are small by historical standards. Great famines – meaning those with death tolls from the hundreds of thousands to just under one million – may now return. Yet most of the world may not even realise that a famine is taking place. As in the 1990s and before, those who wield famine as a weapon will be able to deny or hide what they are doing – and responsible actors will find their ability to cry foul radically diminished.

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