

Grain for the world

Russia's actions are threatening millions of African people with starvation. The US can help.

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(Photo by Ivan Studenov / Creative Commons)

On July 17, Russia withdrew from a UN-negotiated deal that would allow Ukraine, the world's fifth-largest producer of grain, to continue to ship grain out of its Black Sea ports. Russia made it clear that it would consider any Ukrainian ship on the Black Sea fair game for missile strikes, and it started bombing Ukrainian grain infrastructure in Odesa and the Danube river port, including silos full of grain.

The result is the threat of food shortages, especially in Africa. Shashwat Saraf, regional emergency director for East Africa at the International Rescue Committee, called for a long-term extension to the deal to create “predictability and stability” for the region, which has lost vast amounts of crops to drought and floods. Saraf noted that 80 percent of East Africa’s grain comes from Russia and Ukraine, that food prices in the region have gone up almost 40 percent this year, and that 50 million East Africans face hunger.

Russia has reassured its African allies and others that it will replace the missing grain itself, in a one-off show of good will. And indeed, Russia has been busy shoring up alternative trading routes for grain, primarily through the Caspian Sea.

But there are other ways of creating predictability and stability for Africa, ways unrelated to the grain deal Russia is using to weaponize food security. Globally, 768 million people face chronic hunger, and 205 million of them are in dire need of lifesaving food assistance. The US has resources to address this now.

There are challenges involved, mostly around where grain is located and how to transport it safely. Some argue that the best use of US resources lies in supporting Ukrainian agriculture. (The USAID recently pledged another \$250 million to this end.) Others would prioritize working with Turkey and other allies to ensure grain’s safe passage from Ukraine. The US is looking at ways to quickly build grain storage facilities that can be moved wherever they are needed. It could also draw on its own substantial strategic reserves.

Any and all of these steps could help. The key is to keep our eye on global hunger itself. Too often the US is so focused on its foreign policy interests and the complexity of global markets that it loses sight of the fundamental problem of starving people. Instead, the US could pledge that it will work with its considerable resources and allies to ensure that there is no food crisis in Africa and the Middle East this winter. The whole world would be safer for it.

In every crisis lies an opportunity. The US has an opportunity to demonstrate itself as a flexible and compassionate partner, capable of projecting where hunger will be worst and then mitigating its effects. When Russia tried to weaponize its monopoly on oil and gas markets last year, the US used its reserves strategically to mitigate a crisis in Europe. The tactic worked, and it bought time for longer-term strategies to be put in place.

Russia is no doubt to blame for this crisis. But there is much the US can do.