

# Hunger used as a weapon

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Ravenously attacking even a single crumb of bread or a spoilt fruit The choice the Polish pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman had to make between being killed at the hands of enemy soldiers or starving to death in World War II later became the main plot of the movie The Pianist.

It has been 70 years since then, yet people are still forced to choose between hunger or death under bombs. Moreover, it is not merely a handful of people who face this decision. In Yemen, South Sudan and Syria, thousands of innocent civilians are in dire need of food in areas where they sought refuge from conflicts.

What is more horrifying, however, is the planned creation of hunger as a warfare strategy. The UN issued a statement noting that “killing by hunger” is being used as a new weapon in the Syrian war, and that civilians in East Ghouta are condemned to starvation. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, said “the deliberate starvation of civilians” is used as a tactic in the Syrian civil war, noting that “depriving the civil population” of food constitutes a clear violation of international humanitarian law, thus what is happening in Eastern Ghouta is a crime.

A similar statement on how civilians in Syria are deliberately doomed to hunger was made by Hilal Elver, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, who called attention to the civilians left to starve in Syria.

Eastern Ghouta, a suburban area in Damascus, is home to about 400000 inhabitants. What is striking, however, is the fact that prior to the war, the region was a major agricultural centre of the country.

Nevertheless, this opposition-controlled area has been under siege by the Assad regime forces since 2013, and as a consequence, sufficient humanitarian aid cannot be supplied to the region.

The tunnels used until recently to deliver food to civilians having been closed off by the regime’s military operations further escalates the level of starvation in Eastern Ghouta.

The gravity of the situation was fully realised when the images of babies who were about to die of hunger filmed by an AFP reporter were featured in the international media.

The babies seen on the images were so severely malnourished that they could not even make much of a noise to cry. The mothers were also too undernourished to breastfeed their babies, while the fathers were unable to afford the much-needed food.

In Eastern Ghouta, where 206 children and 67 women died according to the statement made by SNHR (Syrian Network for Human Rights), 400000 people are faced with malnutrition; sustained healthcare services are virtually impossible for these people.

The arrival of UN aid trucks in Ghouta this week is indeed a joyful development. However, it is by now a well-known fact that the problem cannot be overcome by aid alone. It seems that the policy of systematically inflicting hunger on the region will remain unchanged unless any measure is taken against it.

Another country faced with the threat of hunger because of war is Yemen. Among the 7 million people living in the war zone, only 3 million have access to food provided by aid whereas, according to UN estimates, at least 4.5 million are in need of nutritional assistance.

Jan Egeland, secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, defines and condemns the situation in Yemen as “the gigantic failure of international diplomacy”. Admitting to being shocked to the bone by what he saw in the region, Egeland notes that drought is not at fault for what is happening in Yemen, and that it is man-made from A to Z.

His observation attests to the fact that, just as in Ghouta, people are being condemned to starvation in Yemen too. The Port of Hodeida in Yemen has been kept closed for a long time, which practically renders it impossible to deliver aid to the region. For this reason alone, a child under 5 faces the risk of death every 10 minutes in Yemen.

In regard to Syria, the area, which also encompasses eastern Ghouta, is located within the de-escalation zones that Turkey, Iran and Russia have agreed to establish in Syria. However, securing these zones is a process that takes time.

This, in turn, delays the prevention of loss of life. Yet it is still possible to implement temporary solutions for these areas.

For example, committees consisting of regime supporters as well as Russian and Turkish civilians could be formed in Ghouta under the UN's supervision, which will constantly monitor the humanitarian aid delivered to the region. Similarly, a civil committee incorporating all parties could be assigned to the Port of Hodeida in Yemen.

In this way, any doubts over whether the aid sent to the belligerent parties contains weapons could be eliminated.

Technical measures should doubtlessly be a priority. However, what will ensure a definitive solution in the region is the formation of a rationalistic alliance by the countries of the region.

Key steps should be taken following the ceasefire, which will contribute towards ensuring peace in the region, particularly under the guarantee of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

In order to achieve this, it is essential that the relevant parties make decisions on common grounds and make their implementation a priority; all necessary measures must be implemented to stop the bloodshed in the region, and actions that will squash terrorism must be taken as well, and an end to Western intervention is necessary. Such a solution can only be achieved by powerful alliances.

Yahya is an influential Turkish author and opinion shaper who has written 300 books which have been translated into 73 languages

<https://web.archive.org/web/20171108141020/https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/hunger-used-as-a-weapon-11905609>

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