

Global Hunger Index highlights South Asia's social misery

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The 2017 Global Hunger Index (GHI), released last month by the International Food Policy Research Institute, reported that “millions of people” worldwide are “experiencing chronic hunger” and “many places are suffering acute food crises and even famine.”

The report singled out South Asia and African countries south of the Sahara as the regions worst affected. Their overall GHI scores, which measure total undernourishment and stunting, wasting and mortality among children under five years of age, were 30.9 and 29.4 respectively.

A score of 100 indicates complete food insecurity across a population, while zero would show food security. GHI figures above 20 point to “serious” food shortages. Scores of more than 35 indicate an “alarming” food situation, and readings over 50 demonstrate an “extremely alarming” crisis.

The Central African Republic was in the extremely alarming range. Other African countries, including Chad, Liberia, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Zambia, were in the alarming range.

India, which accounts for three quarters of the South Asian population, ranked 100 out of 119 countries for food security. Pakistan was 106, while Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka ranked 107, 88 and 84 respectively.

Child undernutrition in South Asia, measured by child stunting and child wasting, was higher than in the worst-hit areas of Africa.

India's GHI score was 31.4, at the high end of the serious category. Some 38 percent of Indian children suffered from stunting, where height growth is limited by insufficient caloric intake.

The report cited recent survey findings showing that only 9.6 percent of Indian infants aged 6-23 months receive an adequate diet. Just 42.7 percent of babies are

introduced to the complementary food they require after breast feeding. Only 48.4 percent of all households have access to sufficient sanitation facilities.

The figures underscore the poverty-stricken living conditions of the vast majority of the population, comprised of sweatshop workers, low-paid contract employees and the oppressed rural masses. Some 800 million people subsist on less than \$2 a day.

Their plight contrasts with the unprecedented riches gorged by the top end of Indian society.

According to *Forbes'* 2017 global wealth rankings, there are 100 Indian billionaires. Only the United States, China and Russia are home to a greater number. India's richest 1 percent own a staggering 58.4 percent of the country's wealth, according to 2016 figures from the Credit Suisse Research Institute.

That data also indicated that 80 percent of adults in India and Africa are in the bottom half of global wealth distribution. The poorest half of the world's population owns less than 1 percent of total wealth, compared to the top 10 percent, which controls 89 percent.

The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) fiscal affairs director, Victor Gaspar, told reporters last month: “If we look at inequality country by country, we realise that most people around the world live in countries where inequality has increased. It is important to emphasise that inequality has increased in the largest countries in the world: China, India and the United States.”

The Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is imposing a deeply-unpopular program that is exacerbating the wealth divide. Its demonetisation scheme, introduced at the end of last year, has driven down the incomes of workers and the poor. A new Goods and Services Tax is further eroding the wages of

the most exploited workers.

Sri Lanka's score in the global hunger index increased from 24.2 in 2008 to 25.5 this year. Undernourishment, child stunting and child mortality registered minimal declines. Child wasting, however, where physical weight is limited by insufficient food intake, soared from 13.3 percent in 2006-2010, to 21.4 percent in 2012-2016.

According to the latest 2016 statistics, poverty has increased sharply in the war-ravaged northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The percentage of the population living in poverty in Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi districts was 10, 11.3, 12.7 and 18.2 percent respectively.

The Sri Lankan government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is imposing IMF demands for the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, a dramatic reduction in government spending and stepped-up attacks on the working class.

Pakistan registered the second-highest GHI figure in South Asia, at 32.6, while the figure for Afghanistan, devastated by a 16-year US military occupation, was 33.3. Figures for child stunting in Pakistan have risen by 5 percent since 2010, to 45 percent in total. One-fifth of the entire population is undernourished.

Elsewhere in the region, the food situation in Bangladesh is "serious," with a GHI reading of 26.4.

In Nepal, 8.1 percent of the population is undernourished. Some 37.4 percent of children under five are stunted. The mortality rate for children in that age group is 3.6 percent.

While the vast majority of South Asia's people are suffering malnutrition or food insecurity, governments throughout the region are allocating billions of dollars to their armed forces. This is in preparation to suppress social opposition and participate in mounting geopolitical conflicts.

India, which is playing a central role in the US-led plans for war against China, increased its military spending by 10 percent this year, to an annual total of 2.74 trillion Indian rupees (\$US42 billion). Pakistan's 2017-18 military budget is 7 percent higher than the previous year, at 920.2 billion Pakistan rupees (\$US8.7 billion).

According to the World Bank, India spends 2.5 percent of its gross domestic product on the military, Pakistan 3.6 percent and Sri Lanka 2.4 percent. In other

words, the region's governments can find money for war, but have no solution to the social misery afflicting the masses.



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