

UN report on food security

One in every nine human beings goes hungry

Patrick Martin
13 September 2018

The number of hungry people in the world continues to grow, reaching 821 million in 2017, or one in every nine people, according to the report, “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018,” released Tuesday in Rome by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, UNICEF and other groups.

The figures are horrific: 151 million children under five years old, 22 percent of the world’s total, are “stunted” by malnutrition; one in every ten children in Asia is described as “wasting,” with weights well below what they should be given their heights; a staggering one in three women of child-bearing age suffers from anemia, in large measure from poor diet.

The report’s authors warn of “alarming signs of increasing food insecurity and high levels of different forms of malnutrition,” but offer no prescription to resolve the deepening crisis except the pious wish that more should be done to bring an end to the military conflicts, including civil wars, which are the primary cause of food insecurity, and to counteract climate change, the second most important cause.

The 821 million hungry people in the world include an estimated 515 million in Asia, 256.5 million in Africa, 39 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, and perhaps 20 million in the rest of the world.

The last figure is undoubtedly a gross underestimate, since it largely accepts the claims of governments in the advanced capitalist countries that hunger and malnutrition are non-existent. If accurate figures could be obtained for the number living on the brink of starvation in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the European Union, the total for the world would likely top 1 billion people.

These figures demonstrate the utter failure of the capitalist system. The productive forces—land,

machinery, agricultural technique—are more than adequate to feed the human race. There is a superabundance of food on the planet. But the profit drive of giant agribusiness corporations, and the reactionary nation-state system, dividing humanity with its artificial and completely outmoded boundaries, keep a billion human beings from obtaining the food they need as a minimum condition of a decent existence.

The UN report found that 2017 was the third year in a row in which the number of people who aren’t getting enough to eat has risen. This figure has risen from 783.7 million in 2014, for a total rise of more than 38 million. In 2017, severe food insecurity, defined as a family running out of food and going at least a day without eating, was up in every region of the world except Europe and North America.

The sharpest increases in malnutrition were in Africa and South America, as well as in the country of Yemen, on the Arabian Peninsula across the Red Sea from East Africa, which has been ravaged by war and a blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with US backing. High levels of malnutrition were found in South Asia as well, but these were largely unchanged from 2016 to 2017.

Over a longer time frame, since 2005, the FAO found that the number of malnourished people in Africa had increased by 60 million, while the number in Asia declined significantly.

Particularly striking was the change in North Africa, once a comparatively prosperous area, where the number facing malnutrition fell from 9.7 million in 2000 to 8.5 million in 2010, before soaring to 20 million last year. Similarly, the number facing malnutrition in Western Asia—the Middle East—rose from 20.1 million in 2010 to 30.2 million in 2017.

The combined increase across this vast region,

extending from Morocco to Iran, is more than 20 million people added to the rolls of those on the brink of starvation, during the period that coincides with the US-NATO attack on Libya, the revolutionary uprising and its bloody suppression in Egypt, the ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen, and the aftermath of the war in Iraq.

The FAO's 2017 report on food security focused largely on the impact of these wars, as well as similar conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Somalia in driving up the number facing hunger. The agency's 2018 report focuses mainly on the impact of the second most important cause of hunger in the twenty-first century, climate change.

According to the report, "climate variability—extreme droughts and floods—are already undermining production of wheat, rice and maize in tropical and temperate regions, and that the trend is expected to worsen as temperatures increase and become more extreme."

It continued, "Hunger is significantly worse in countries with agricultural systems that are highly sensitive to rainfall and temperature variability and severe drought, and where the livelihood of a high proportion of the population depends on agriculture."

Drought, linked to the long-term changes in weather patterns associated with climate change, has devastated four different population centers: southern Africa, including South Africa, the enclaves of Lesotho and Swaziland, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Madagascar; the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda; West Africa, from Mali to Senegal; and parts of the Indian subcontinent, especially southern Sindh province in Pakistan and neighboring regions in India, which are densely populated.

Wasting is a syndrome that has the most pernicious effect on children's health, both short-term and long-term. Children affected by wasting accounted for 875,000 deaths in 2013, the last year when studies are available, 12.6 percent of all deaths of children under five years of age. Of these, 516,000 were related to severe wasting, essentially deaths by starvation and related diseases.

Half of all the children afflicted by wasting live in South Asia, and the countries with a prevalence of 15

percent or more include India and Sri Lanka. Also in this category are Papua New Guinea, Yemen, and four countries in East Africa: Eritrea, Djibouti, South Sudan, and Sudan.

What all these countries have in common—although there is not a word of this in the UN report—is that they are former colonies of the world's imperialist powers, which continue to dominate the world economy and exploit the resources of the "less developed countries," whether through direct investment, loans, or austerity demands enforced by the International Monetary Fund.

Among the worst-off countries are those like Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia, subjected to imperialist wars and imperialist-instigated civil wars, which in some cases have extended for more than a generation.

Nutrition is an increasing concern, not just for the billions in Asia, Africa and Latin America, who constitute the majority of the world's population, but for the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, where living standards have been driven down for more than three decades.

According to the UN report, the second-largest nutritional crisis involves the spread of obesity, particularly in North America. This too is a disease of poverty. "Food insecurity contributes to overweight and obesity, as well as undernutrition, and high rates of these forms of malnutrition coexist in many countries," the report explains. "The link between food insecurity and overweight and obesity passes through diet, which is affected by the cost of food. Nutritious, fresh foods often tend to be expensive. Thus, when household resources for food become scarce, people choose less expensive foods that are often high in caloric density and low in nutrients, particularly in urban settings and upper-middle- and high-income countries."

Some 13 percent of the world's adults, or 672 million, are medically obese, about one person in eight, with the highest rates by far in the United States. The lowest rates of obesity are in Africa and Asia, although rates are rapidly increasing.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact