UN’s highest ever humanitarian appeal falls on imperialism’s deaf ears

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On Thursday, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched an appeal to the major powers for a record $41 billion to help the 183 million people most in need of life-saving assistance.

This was a large increase on the $35 billion requested for 2021 and double the amount sought just four years ago. It is needed for some 63 countries, nearly one third of the 193 United Nations member states, most of which came into existence after the national liberation movements took over from the colonial powers that had previously ruled them.

Speaking at a news conference at Thursday’s launch of the appeal, OCHA head and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths stressed that the number of people in need “has never been as high as this.” He said, “The climate crisis is hitting the world’s most vulnerable people first and worst. Protracted conflicts grind on, and instability has worsened in several parts of the world, notably Ethiopia, Myanmar and Afghanistan.”

Worse is to come.

OCHA’s *Global Humanitarian Overview 2022 report*, published the same day, draws on the work of 37 agencies, including various UN agencies and international aid organisations. It said 274 million people worldwide will need some form of emergency assistance next year, up 17 percent from the 235 million in 2021, a record high. One in 29 of the world’s 7.9 billion people will need help in 2022, up 250 percent on 2015 when one in 95 needed assistance.

The report noted that the COVID-19 pandemic, fueled by vaccine inequality, has devastated economies, livelihoods, health systems and education. Testing, diagnosis and treatment for HIV, TB and malaria have fallen. Ante-natal visits dropped by 43 percent and 23 million children missed basic childhood vaccines in 2021. With 2.2 billion children without access to the internet at home, many faced disruption to their education.

The pandemic has increased suffering and extreme poverty, rising again after two decades of decline with women and young workers disproportionately affected by job losses. Some 247 million women live on less than $1.90 a day. Hunger is on the rise and food insecurity has reached unprecedented levels, with 811 million people (11 percent of the world’s population) undernourished and famine “a real and terrifying possibility in 43 countries.”

Political conflicts have hit civilians hard. More than 1 percent of the world’s population is now displaced, of whom 42 percent are children. Millions of internally displaced people (IDPs) live in camps or in impoverished conditions in cities for long periods, unable to return home.

The humanitarian needs are by far the greatest in the Middle East and Africa, thanks to wars provoked, fueled and paid for by the imperialist powers in pursuit of access to raw materials and markets in the interests of the corporations they represent. The priority of the local oligarchies is to remain competitive for foreign investments, while continuing debt payments to the financial vultures, expanding their armed forces and suppressing the revolutionary strivings of the working class and poor peasants.

According to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 45 million people are at risk of famine in dozens of countries, with Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan topping the list. In Afghanistan, more than 24 million people are in dire need of assistance as the result of four decades of war and now the worst drought in 27 years.

Syria, which has endured more than 10 years of a US-led war to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, faces a lack of basic commodities amid a horrifically damaged infrastructure. Average household expenditure exceeds income by 50 percent compared with 20 percent in August 2020.

In Yemen, at war since Saudi Arabia, aided and abetted by the US, Britain and the regional powers, invaded its impoverished southern neighbour in April 2015, 16.2 million of the 30 million population face acute food shortages. Even with humanitarian assistance, 40 percent of the population do not have enough food.

In Ethiopia, 25.9 million of its 118 million population need help as a result of the war in Tigray and other parts of the country, Drought and disease are mounting, with many of the country’s 4.2 million IDPs seeking shelter in the towns and cities, adding to the social and economic pressures. In South Sudan, 8.4 million of its 11 million people are in need, as a result of the ongoing civil war since independence from Sudan in 2011, and three years of flooding and disease.

As well as the Middle East and Africa, there has been increased demand for humanitarian assistance from Asia and

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the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean. The situation in Myanmar has deteriorated significantly in the wake of last February's military coup and the pandemic, with 14.4 million of the country's 55 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. In Haiti, a massive 43 percent of the population need aid, in the wake of last August's earthquake that affected 800,000 people, on top of the even more devastating one in 2010, the pandemic, and the deteriorating economic situation.

Despite the desperate need, funding for 2022 will not be forthcoming. This year's OCHA appeal garnered just $17 billion, less than half the amount requested, with the 10 most underfunded emergencies receiving less than half what was needed, leading to cutbacks in food rations and life-saving healthcare services. Griffiths acknowledged this, saying, "We're aware that we're not going to get the $41 billion, much as we will try hard." He did not spell out why this was so or the consequences for the world's most destitute people.

It is not as if there are no resources available. The world's richest billionaires have seen their wealth increase astronomically this past year and could easily foot the entire bill. According to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, the net worth of Elon Musk, founder and CEO of Tesla and the richest person in the world as of December 2021 is $311 billion, while that of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos is $201 billion. Yet the world's governments refuse to tax them or their ilk.

This leaves the OCHA reliant on appeals to donor countries that have become increasingly unsuccessful.

Its parent body and the UN's humanitarian agency, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), was set up in 1950 along with the 1951 Convention on Human Rights and the Convention on the Status of Refugees to address the tens of million refugee, forcibly displaced and stateless people following World War II, in the political context of the Cold War. At that time, popular revulsion at the Holocaust happened to align with Washington's strategic interests in asserting its global hegemony, containing the influence of the Stalinist regime in Moscow and above all suppressing the threat of social revolution on a global scale.

Nevertheless, the UNHCR, and the agencies it spawned in the 1990s such as OCHA after the collapse of the Soviet Union, were always funded on an ad hoc basis.

Its approach was based primarily on aiding those in camps and defending the right to seek asylum anywhere but in the imperialist centres. This laid the framework of a global refugee regime, providing the template for the response to multiple crises in the 1960s in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Europe within the context of the Cold War.

Today, the majority of IDPs do not reside in camps, while the right to asylum is being obliterated.

OCHA's appeal and report fell on deaf ears. Indeed, the agency pointed out the complete bankruptcy of its call. Admitting it had no solutions for the crisis, the OCHA declared, "Humanitarian aid cannot provide a path out of protracted crises when such a scarcity of funds persists."

There was no mention of the appeal in the world's press, testifying to the degree to which starvation and misery are not only being normalized but becoming the policy of choice—a weapon in the hands of the major imperialist powers that speak for their corporate and financial oligarchs, and their puppet regimes in the world's poorest countries.

Washington now routinely uses sanctions and secondary sanctions to exert "maximum pressure" on Cuba, Venezuela, Iran and its allies in Syria and Lebanon, to cite but a few, in a bid to force them to toe its line. Israel has blockaded Gaza for more than 14 years; Saudi Arabia has besieged Yemen for six years and the Ethiopian government is blockading Tigray province to starve the rebels into submission.

The words of *Bani Adam*, the Children of Adam, the poem written in the 13th century by Sa'adi, are inscribed on a wall-mounted carpet donated by Tehran in the UN building in New York. They read:

> beings are members of a whole,
> In creation of one essence and soul.
> If one member is afflicted with pain,
> Other members uneasy will remain.
> If you've no sympathy for human pain,
> The name of human you cannot retain!

Workers must understand that an end to such inhumanity means waging a political struggle against imperialist militarism and the systematic expropriation of the wealth of the planet by the corporate and financial elite. Everywhere, entire populations have been exploited and reduced to penury, while those countries that possess valuable resources have been targeted for military assaults. The struggle is not to reform the capitalist system but to overthrow it as part of a world-wide struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society based on human need not profit.

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