

Super El Niño will exacerbate hunger crisis faced by hundreds of millions of children around the world

César Uco
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El Niño, the recurring warming of the equatorial Pacific Ocean, was first named by Peruvian fishermen for a warm current off their coast, but it has long been understood to reshape weather across the globe. In today's world economy, its effects are felt not only in the climate, but through global supply chains linking agricultural production, fisheries, trade and food prices.

The event now developing threatens to be the most powerful on record, translating into billions of dollars in losses, hunger, destroyed homes and livelihoods, displacement and death.

In its September 10 diagnostic discussion, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) put the probability of a “very strong” El Niño during the Northern Hemisphere fall and winter at more than 90 percent. It gave a 75 percent chance that between October and December it will become “a historic event that would exceed the strength of previous El Niño events dating back to 1950.”

On September 21, the daily temperature anomaly in the Niño 3.4 region of the central Pacific, which measures El Niño's strength, reached 3.11°C, breaking the record of 3.08°C set in November 2015, according to *Carbon Brief*. The forecast models it surveyed project a peak of around 4.1°C later this year, well beyond any El Niño in the instrumental record.

On September 30, UNICEF reported that at least 25.8 million children in Latin America and the Caribbean, roughly one in seven, are exposed to droughts and floods associated with El Niño.

A convergence of global warming, exceptionally warm waters in the equatorial Pacific and the geopolitical catastrophe produced by the US-Israeli war against Iran has created the conditions for a “perfect storm.”

Jean-Martin Bauer, director of food security analysis at the World Food Programme (WFP), told *El País* that the number of people suffering from acute food insecurity has risen from 130 million to 266 million in just 10 years. “We already have three countries with communities at risk of famine: Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia,” he warned. In August, the WFP projected that El Niño would push another 49 million people into acute hunger, raising the total in the countries where the organization operates from 225 million to 274 million.

None of this is just a natural disaster. El Niño is striking a world in which capitalism has already created the conditions for mass hunger. The poorest countries depend on the world market for

food, an imperialist war has choked off fertilizer shipments from the region that supplies a third of the world's urea exports, and the major powers are gutting food aid while pouring record sums into armaments. Whether a climate shock becomes a famine is decided not merely by ocean temperatures, but by social relations.

From Peru to the Dry Corridor

Warming in the central equatorial Pacific has traditionally been associated with drought in Central America's Dry Corridor, while warming in the Niño 1+2 region, off Ecuador and Peru, strikes those two countries directly.

Peru's Multisectoral Commission for the National Study of the El Niño Phenomenon (ENFEN) maintains its Coastal El Niño Alert. Its September 28 statement forecasts warming of “extraordinary” magnitude in that region through January 2027, with moderate to intense rains on the northern coast beginning this month. The danger is twofold: while the northern coast faces torrential rains, floods and landslides, the southern highlands and parts of the Amazon could suffer rainfall deficits and crop losses.

Peruvian authorities have allocated more than 4.2 billion soles for disaster prevention and are mobilizing troops, helicopters, aircraft and emergency food reserves. As of July 6, however, national, regional and local governments had spent only 44 percent of the year's disaster-risk budget. Previous disasters show what is at stake.

The 1982–83 El Niño killed 512 people in Peru and left nearly 1.27 million homeless or otherwise affected, with losses of \$3.28 billion, equal to 11.6 percent of GDP. Fifteen years later, the 1997–98 event caused some \$3.5 billion in damages, roughly 6 percent of GDP. Behind those figures were flooded coastal cities without adequate drainage, destroyed homes, isolated communities and workers and small farmers who lost their sources of income.

While Peru braces for rain, Central America faces the opposite danger. Drought spreads across the Dry Corridor, where millions depend on small farms, and subsistence crops are already being lost in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. On August 19, Honduras placed 234 of its 298 municipalities,

including the capital Tegucigalpa, under alert. In Panama, drought delayed rice planting, and the area sown is expected to reach only about 60,000 hectares against a target of 90,000. In Colombia's Tolima department, dry-season wildfires burned more than 50,000 hectares, destroying 14,340 hectares of crops and affecting 28,000 producers.

A Super El Niño would intensify an already immense hunger crisis globally. According to the UN's *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report, published in July, 645 million people faced chronic hunger in 2025. In Africa the figure was one in five, or 309 million people, and the continent has overtaken Asia as the region with the most hungry people. This mass hunger exists alongside unprecedented scientific and technological advances in food production and distribution.

According to the Global Report on Food Crises, 78 percent of the 42 countries facing major food crises in 2022 were net food importers. When world prices rise, countries without the foreign exchange to buy enough food on the world market go hungry.

The response of the major powers has been to cut the lifeline. The WFP's funding was projected to fall by some 40 percent in 2025 after the Trump administration slashed foreign aid, and other major donors, including several European governments, also cut their humanitarian budgets. Last November the agency warned that it could assist only 110 million of the 318 million people facing acute hunger in 2026, at a cost of \$13 billion, and that it expected to receive barely half of that.

UNICEF's \$53.8 million appeal for emergencies in Latin America and the Caribbean, including preparations for El Niño, was still 55 percent unfunded at the end of June. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is seeking \$1.5 trillion for the military in fiscal 2027. The WFP's entire 2026 requirement amounts to less than 1 percent of that sum.

A crisis spanning continents

Economic globalization has multiplied the ways a regional climate disaster becomes a worldwide crisis. A failed harvest in Latin America, Africa or Asia can drive up international prices for grains, coffee and cocoa, and with them the price of food for families thousands of miles away. Small farmers are particularly vulnerable. According to a 2021 FAO estimate, farms of two hectares or less produce approximately 35 percent of the world's food, yet they have little capacity to absorb drought, flooding and rising fertilizer and fuel prices at the same time.

The war against Iran has turned that last danger into a reality. After the Strait of Hormuz was effectively closed at the end of February, the price of urea, the most widely used nitrogen fertilizer, roughly doubled within weeks. The Gulf supplies about a third of the world's urea exports. Farmers who cannot afford fertilizer plant less and harvest less. El Niño, global warming and war therefore cease to operate as separate crises. Their consequences converge on the same populations: workers, farmers and fishermen all over the world.

Global warming forms the backdrop. Rising temperatures are accelerating the loss of glaciers in the Himalayas, Greenland, Antarctica and Patagonia, and the ruling classes see in this an opportunity for plunder. The Trump administration's drive to seize Greenland is bound up in part with access to minerals exposed by retreating ice. In Argentina, the Milei government, Washington's closest ally in South America, pushed through a reform of the Glacier Law this year that allows provincial governors to open periglacial zones to mining.

A Super El Niño can also temporarily push global temperatures still higher, bringing the planet closer to transformations that could unfold over decades. One of the most alarming is the progressive conversion of parts of the Amazon rainforest into drier ecosystems. The immediate burden would fall on Indigenous communities and on cities such as Manaus, Iquitos and Pucallpa that depend on the forest and its rivers for their food and livelihoods, but a severely weakened Amazon would further disrupt the climate and agricultural production worldwide.

The climate crisis is not a failure of science or technology, but of the social relations under which they operate. Under capitalism, production is driven by the accumulation of profit rather than human need.

This contradiction is especially destructive because the climate crisis is global, while the world remains divided into competing nation-states, each defending the interests of its own ruling class. Every climate summit runs into this wall.

Every hungry child therefore poses the same fundamental contradiction. Humanity has the productive and technological capacity to feed the world's population, yet hundreds of millions go hungry. The fight against hunger and climate catastrophe is inseparable from the struggle to unite the international working class and reorganize the world economy on the basis of human need rather than private profit: the fight for socialism.



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