

## Famines Throughout History

Today, according to the UN, the international community is facing its greatest humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II. In March 2017, UN official Stephen O'Brien told the UN Security Council that a number of countries are in need of humanitarian aid to avoid massive population losses due to starvation and disease. He argued that more than twenty million people in four countries facing the threat of starvation and famine—Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, and Nigeria—were in need of increased humanitarian aid immediately. Specifically, O'Brien reported that around \$4.4 billion dollars by the summer is necessary. Since then, concern has only increased. Famine has already been declared in South Sudan, and the food crises faced by the other countries continue to worsen.

### *What is a famine?*

According to the United Nations and other food security organizations, three criteria must be met before a food security crisis is declared a famine. These criteria are:

- At least 20 percent of all households face extreme food shortages and lack access to food.
- Rates of acute malnutrition are greater than 30 percent.
- The death rate is greater than two people per day per 10,000 people.

***“When you declare a famine, bad things have already happened. People have already died.”***

—Arif Husain, chief economist for the World Food Program in Rome, February 2017

It is important to note that food crises and shortages are not the same, by definition, as a famine. For a food crisis to be labeled a famine, the criteria listed above must be met. Many groups can name an event a famine if

they feel it meets these criteria, but people typically look to the UN for decisions on this matter.

### *What are some examples of famines throughout history?*

Famines are not a new phenomenon. They have existed throughout history and throughout the world. All famines have specific causes unique to the time and place. But at the same time, some similarities often exist. For example, in most cases, famines throughout history (and today) have typically been caused by multiple factors, not just one. Conflict is nearly always one of these factors. Just two of many historical examples of famines and their causes are discussed below.

**Irish Potato Famine:** The Irish Potato famine took place in Ireland from 1845-1850. A number of factors interacted and led to the famine. For one, a blight, or a disease that destroyed the potato crop, caused the crop of potatoes to fail. Making matters worse, the potato crop failed again in the following years (1846-1849).

By the mid nineteenth century, close to half of Ireland's population—most of whom were poor and from rural areas—depended on the potato to survive. Dependence on the potato was a result of British colonial policies that sought to make Ireland as profitable as possible for Britain.

As their crops failed, Irish farmers had their jobs taken from them, they were evicted from their land, and they could not afford to feed themselves or their families.

The British government, which controlled Ireland, took some measures to end the famine. For example, the British shipped maize from the United States to Ireland and helped provide funding for soup kitchens. But, these British efforts were not enough. In some cases, Irish landowners and others also helped people affected by the famine, for example by collecting money or funding soup kitchens.

Some British people who falsely believed that Irish people were inferior to them even incorrectly blamed the Irish people for the famine by saying that they had families that were too large. Many argue that their prejudice against Irish people led the British not to act as efficiently or effectively as they should have in order to address the crisis.

The famine had a number of effects. In 1844, Ireland had a population of 8.4 million. But, by 1851, the population had dropped to 6.6 million. Around one million people died either from starvation or from the disease typhus. Nearly two million Irish people emigrated to escape the famine—many going to the United States. After the famine, fewer people owned land, and more land than before started to be used for raising sheep and cattle. Finally, the famine also made many Irish people believe that the British government's colonial policies would only lead to further damage of Ireland.

**Great Chinese Famine:** The Great Chinese Famine took place in the People's Republic of China from 1959-1962. From 1958 to 1960, the communist Chinese government had a program called the Great Leap Forward. With this program, it aimed to get China's population to work to spur industrial and economic growth. For example, the government created rural communes for agricultural labor, and small steel furnaces became common in villages and neighborhoods. The first commune was created in Henan—a province located in north central China—in 1958, and other communes were developed in the months and years following.

The government's policies were largely unsuccessful and did not reach many of their goals. For example, many Chinese people believed that the way these policies were implemented took away their rights.

***“With the establishment of communes, all property has become State-owned; all houses and furniture have been turned into Government***

***property. They merely do what they like. No one has any rights at all.”***

—A person from Guangdong in a  
1959 letter

The communes were also inefficient. This hurt China's agricultural production. In addition to government policies, natural disasters intensified the trouble that Chinese people faced. Soon, in 1960, the Chinese government began to repeal the policies of the Great Leap Forward, but it did not act soon enough to avoid further tragedy.

In the end, about twenty million people died from starvation from 1959-1962. People throughout the country were affected. The ways that people, especially those involved in agriculture, used to make a living were disrupted. In addition, the famine also had political effects. Tensions rose between groups of government officials who had different ideas about how the government should move forward.

### ***What are some causes of famines?***

As was the case in the historical cases mentioned above, a number of factors can lead to famine. For example, crop failure, changes in the population, natural disasters, war, and government policies can all lead to food crises and, ultimately, famine. In most cases, it is a combination of factors that cause a famine.

### ***Which countries face a threat of famine today?***

Today, UN research indicates that four countries are facing the threat of famine: Nigeria (in the northeast), Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen. In some parts of South Sudan, experts agree that people are already experiencing famine.

### ***How do people respond to famines?***

International and local organizations and governments have responded to famines and the threat of famine in numerous ways throughout history. Experts agree that famine response should be designed to meet the

specific needs of the affected community. This means thinking about the causes of the famine and responding accordingly. For example, sometimes organizations import food to affected areas where food is scarce. In other cases, when food is available but it is too expensive for many people to buy, organizations instead provide money or food vouchers. Some people also argue that more should be done to prevent famines before they happen. For example, some organizations work to encourage sustainable food and farming practices or to slow down the effects of climate change.

In many cases, even when they do try to provide aid, relief organizations are unable to access the people who need the aid because of conflicts or because they might live in rural areas.

**“[T]here is only so much that humanitarian assistance can achieve in the absence of meaningful peace and security, both for relief workers and the crisis-affected people they serve.”**

—Joyce Luma, official from the World Food Programme, speaking about the situation in South Sudan, February 2017

### ***What are some of the effects of famine?***

Famines have many serious consequences. Most obviously, famine leads to many deaths. Some people die from starvation, while others die from diseases that they contract and cannot fight because a lack of food has left them weak. Many of these diseases result from a lack of access to clean water. For those who do survive a famine, many people face health problems as a result throughout their life. For example, some children may have their growth stunted.

In addition to social changes, famines can also have political and economic consequences. For example, people often point to a government’s failure to address a famine as a reason for a shift in political or economic structure.

As you read the *Washington Post* article “Starving to Death,” on current food crises and famines and fill in your graphic organizer, keep in mind the ideas about which you just read. Be sure to take note of the many causes of food crises and famines, who they effect, and how people have responded to them.