



Lives Hang in the Balance

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN PERIL: MARCH 2025 REPORT

Preventing the Reversal of Years of Progress

The abrupt termination of U.S. food assistance programs and the freezing of USAID funds will have immediate life-and-death consequences for vulnerable people worldwide and impact U.S. security. Catholic Relief Services and partners are witnessing these impacts in real time: as food distributions halt, people go hungry, and without treatment for acute malnutrition, children will die.

Although some lifesaving assistance has been exempted, funds for many programs remain unreleased. The sudden suspension and termination of these programs, along with continued payment delays, are causing confusion at the community level, potential harm to staff and partners, and risking the lives of the most vulnerable.

In fragile contexts of conflict and displacement, where the nutrition of mothers, infants, and young children is already at risk, reduced assistance will severely compromise health. Families in famine-stricken Sudan are resorting to extreme measures—eating soil and leaves—to survive.

Before many programs were halted, U.S. government assistance played a crucial role in combating hunger. In 2023, nearly 300 million people worldwide faced life-threatening hunger, where severe malnutrition prevented them from consuming calories without nutritional supplements, or they were unable to safely access markets or afford food, often leading to the selling of assets or migration.

Investing in stability through health, education, or economic development prevents humanitarian crises and conflicts, reducing migration, emergency responses and military involvement. U.S. humanitarian assistance is a powerful tool for national security, ensuring safety through global stability.

CRS has been eager to work with the administration on common-sense humanitarian assistance reforms. The abrupt halt of lifesaving food programs will cause needless suffering and deaths among families and children. This not only harms the most vulnerable but also damages America's credibility, risking our standing as a trusted partner and opening the door for exploitation by corrupt governments or terrorist groups.

SUDAN

CONTEXT

The key drivers of hunger for Sudanese families are ongoing conflict and displacement. In addition, falling incomes, broken supply chains, and disrupted agricultural production have led to soaring food prices. Today, at least 8 million to 9 million people are facing "emergency" or "catastrophic" levels of hunger. Among these are people experiencing famine in five areas of the country—with the expectation that famine will spread to an additional five regions by May of this year. Some families have resorted to extreme coping measures, including eating soil and leaves to survive. Up to 25 million people are expected to require food assistance by May 2025.

CRS AND PARTNER PRESENCE

CRS has operated in Sudan since 2004, addressing the cumulative impacts of conflict, economic crisis and natural disasters on vulnerable communities in Darfur, Khartoum and across the country. Since September 2023, despite an extremely challenging operating context, CRS has supported 1.96 million people with food, health care, nutrition, child protection, education, social cohesion activities, livelihoods, and water, sanitation and hygiene.

Before the suspensions and terminations, CRS had five active food security and livelihoods projects funded by the U.S. government, including three projects providing emergency food and health assistance. These programs included support for health centers providing lifesaving nutrition, as well as two agriculture and livestock activities. Through these projects, CRS was in the process of reaching nearly 225,000 families—1.1 million people—in the West, Central and East Darfur and Kordofan regions of Sudan.

Although two CRS projects recently received rescissions to stop work orders and terminations, all USAID projects remain at a standstill because no payments have been received to continue life-saving food assistance.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

Escalating Hunger and Starvation. U.S. humanitarian assistance supported an estimated 6 million to 7 million people last year with emergency food assistance. Sudan will experience high levels of starvation, disease and mortality if left unchecked and humanitarian assistance is interrupted. The situation could lead to the largest number of deaths in decades not caused by violence, but by hunger, disease and malnutrition. Without continued assistance as had been planned to reverse famine conditions and prevent its spread, more than 350,000 people over 5 months in Darfur may experience famine and possible death, and up to 500,000 people over same five months nationwide. Timing is critical. Sudan's lean season, when food stocks are at their lowest, begins in May. This is the time of year when seeds are in the ground and harvests from the previous season begin to run out.

Desperate, Risky Coping Mechanisms. Families have exhausted extreme strategies such as reducing meals, selling livestock or tools to buy food, borrowing or begging, or eating seeds. Other effects include children being taken out of school, forced into child labor or early marriage, and families having to migrate.

If famine spreads across Sudan as projected, more than 100,000 people risk starvation and death within 30 days.

ETHIOPIA

CONTEXT

Families across Ethiopia have been experiencing a severe food crisis, with a lack of rain limiting food production and resulting in high food prices, increased conflict and instability—leading to displacement and poverty. More than 14 million people—about 10% of Ethiopia’s population—need urgent food assistance to survive. Last year, the U.S. government had provided approximately \$365 million for humanitarian food assistance to help families survive a hunger crisis.

CRS AND PARTNER PRESENCE

CRS has worked with local partners in Ethiopia for more than 65 years on a range of programming—from saving lives to restoring land and livelihoods, and strengthening resilience. CRS has been a leader in emergency food assistance through our flagship Joint Emergency Operation (JEOP), which supports an average of 2 million people every month in areas affected by severe drought and food insecurity. CRS’ disaster mitigation and recovery programs have also supported communities living in drought- and flood-prone areas through bolstered agriculture, livestock, health, nutrition and water and sanitation.

These efforts have improved their health, crops, livelihoods and stability. Before the recent suspensions and terminations, CRS was implementing:

- The JEOP project that reached an average of 2 million people monthly with food assistance in 2024.
- A multi-year resilience-building food security project.
- Two seed-related projects.

Through these multiple projects, CRS and partners were in the process of reaching nearly 870,000 families—or around 4.3 million people—with life-changing food security, nutrition and livelihoods programming. Although two CRS projects have received rescissions to stop work orders or terminations, all USAID projects remain at a standstill because payments have been delayed and incomplete.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

In 2024, starvation was reported as the leading cause of death across all age groups in Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region. The suspension and delay of U.S. government food assistance in Ethiopia will have catastrophic consequences, with potentially irreversible impacts on livelihoods and long-term development

Increased Malnutrition and Starvation. In JEOP’s nutrition intervention areas, health facilities are facing shortages of nutrition supplies, which could lead to increased morbidity and mortality among children under 5 and worse health outcomes for pregnant mothers.

Desperate, Risky Coping Mechanisms. More than 86% of families are skipping meals, more than 82% are reducing portion size, and a growing number is going to bed hungry. These numbers will undoubtedly rise as families have to stretch scarce resources.

Risk of Drought. The biggest challenge for families, particularly in southern Ethiopia, is below-average rainfall for the annual March to May rains, which would result in fewer crops, less income, more hunger and widespread livestock mortality. This destabilization could lead to greater regional insecurity and potential refugee flows into neighboring countries, and place additional strain on global humanitarian resources.

In Ethiopia, more than 14 million people need urgent food assistance to survive.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

CONTEXT

Today, 25 million people across the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity due to internal and regional conflicts, as well as significant internal displacement, that have devastated the economy and people's livelihoods.

Since January 2025, clashes between the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) and the rebel paramilitary group March 23 Movement (M23) have intensified in the provinces of North and South Kivu, resulting in the displacement of more than 1 million people. People's access to food and nutrition has declined rapidly. Insecurity is preventing many, including vendors, from accessing markets. Additionally, many banks have closed, and unstable supply chains have led to higher prices.

In FY24, the U.S. government's Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs (BHA) provided approximately \$470 million in humanitarian food assistance to prevent and mitigate food insecurity, bridging the gap in access and affordability of food among many displaced fam.

CRS AND PARTNER PRESENCE

Before the recent suspensions and terminations, CRS was implementing two U.S. government-funded food security, livelihoods and resilience programs that were in the process of reaching nearly 110,000 families— 550,000 people—in the Kasai Central, South Kivu and Tanganyika provinces. Although one CRS project has received a rescission to the project's termination, it remains at a standstill because no payments are being received to continue lifesaving food assistance.



George Kabongo, a farm leader in Tshibola village, stands in a field of cassava plants that he planted with other participants in a CRS project, using improved agricultural techniques. Photo by Jennifer Lazuta/CRS

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

Without food assistance, the more than 1 million displaced people across the east will be far more vulnerable to risks, including severe malnutrition. Recently, cholera outbreaks were reported in collective centers in North Kivu, weakening people's physical well-being. Many displaced families have had to sell their belongings for money, or lost them on their way to seek safer refuge. With limited safety and few opportunities to earn an income, most families have resorted to begging. A withdrawal of food assistance for these extremely vulnerable displaced families means they will have to engage in increasingly risky strategies to survive.

Repeated displacement and conflict can have devastating impacts on families—eroding their assets and opportunities—forever shifting their life trajectory. Crises of this nature can lead families to remove children from school or place them in early marriages. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable when they are without ways to provide for themselves. They can be forced to turn to survival prostitution. Reports repeatedly show how women are often forced to choose between their children going hungry and their enduring sexual assault and violence in order to provide for them.

Without continued assistance in the next six months, at least 3 million people in the DRC are expected to suffer from extreme hunger and malnutrition.

HAITI

CONTEXT

Haiti has been in a crisis of political instability since the 2018 protests, the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, and the 2024 resignation of Prime Minister Ariel Henry. In 2024, Haiti's Transitional Council named new leadership, yet confrontations with gangs have continued, further disrupting lives and livelihoods. Nearly half of the population is facing high levels of acute food insecurity, including 6,000 people experiencing catastrophic levels of hunger.

Organized criminal group activity has resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties, suspended health services, market disruptions and significant displacement and migration. Key national roads have been blocked, disrupting the movement of staple goods. As of December 2024, more than 1 million people were displaced in the country, of which 25% remain in the capital and 75% who have moved primarily to the South Department. Increasing prices for basic food items continue to diminish family purchasing power, with food now comprising 70% of Haitians' total household expenditures. In FY24, the U.S. government provided \$87 million in humanitarian food assistance to the people of Haiti. The current funding reductions will further exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and instability.

CRS AND PARTNER PRESENCE

CRS has been implementing two U.S. government-supported programs that were recently terminated, one that has been suspended, and another that recently received a rescission to its abrupt termination. These programs have been providing vital food security, education and emergency assistance to vulnerable families. Without these programs, 70,000 people will struggle to feed themselves and their families, education quality will be impacted for 18,000 children, an estimated 21,000 children under 5 and their mothers will be at increased risk for malnutrition, and 7,000 people affected by recent flooding will not receive planned support.

The Ayiti pi Djanm, or “Building a Stronger Haiti,” project had been supporting 65,285 displaced people with vital food, nutrition and livelihood support to improve their resilience. Due to the pause, nearly \$2 million in U.S. food designated for these communities has been held up, including more than 1,000 tons of sorghum recently ordered from prepositioned stocks in the United States. The pause has also blocked the approved purchase of more than 6,600 tons of U.S. agricultural products that were destined to feed vulnerable families during the upcoming lean season. The interruption also derails the work being done with 1,320 young people in rural communities to build or start small businesses to support themselves and their families.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

Heightened Food Insecurity. Reductions in humanitarian assistance will further limit their ability to feed their children and themselves, leading to increased rates of malnutrition and mortality—particularly among pregnant women and new mothers, and children under five.

Greater Insecurity and Risk for Outward Migration. Discontinued humanitarian assistance at this especially critical time is likely to fuel further social unrest and gang violence that destabilizes the country and increases the risk of migration. In urban areas, there is high concern of families—including their children—going days without food, begging, and finding themselves pulled into criminal activity by gangs—or fleeing abroad. In rural areas, families might be forced to send their children to stay with relatives or to take part in domestic labor as a desperate alternative. Families might also soon be foraging wild foods that increases the risks of flooding and erosion.

Vulnerability to Storms. The reduction in USAID funding would undermine years-long efforts to strengthen communities' resilience and preparedness activities ahead of the annual hurricane season, which begins in June. With priorities focused on food and survival, families will have less means and strength to take on the previously supported measures to mitigate loss and impact.

In Haiti, an estimated 21,000 children under age 5 will be at risk of malnutrition in the next six months without food assistance.

SOMALIA

CONTEXT

Somalia has been grappling with a deep food crisis for many years, with widespread hunger worsened by ongoing conflict, economic struggles and repeated droughts. The compounded effects of these crises and the economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic have made the situation even more dire, with the Bay and Bakool regions facing real threats of famine. Conflict and insecurity in rural areas of central and southern Somalia have further disrupted people's ability to make a living and safely access markets. The situation has worsened with the withdrawal of African Union troops and ongoing violence from groups like Al-Shabaab, creating an environment of instability. Meanwhile, the Somali government has been stretched thin in its ability to respond to diverse challenges.

As of January 2025, nearly 3.4 million people are facing a crisis level of hunger. Poor rainfall between October and December 2024 led to low crop yields, and many households are now running out of food supplies. As the "hungry season" approaches and food becomes scarcer, market prices are expected to rise, making it even harder for people to access what little food remains. This period also sees a rise in disease and severe malnutrition, particularly among pregnant and breastfeeding women and young children under 5, who are the most vulnerable.

CRS AND PARTNER RESPONSE

CRS has been supporting programs in Somalia for more than 40 years and maintained a continuous presence in the country since 2011. This longstanding commitment has enabled CRS to establish strong, enduring relationships with government officials and humanitarian partners, facilitating sustainable responses to emergencies and enabling large-scale, timely and effective interventions.

Prior to the suspension of U.S. government funds, CRS was implementing a BHA-funded project, Kaafia Plus II, which was in the process of providing lifesaving humanitarian assistance to 566,000 people—or 113,000 families—across Somalia. Although the termination of this project has been rescinded, lifesaving activities have come to a halt due to the suspension of payments. The Kaafia project focused on delivering essential malnutrition screening and treatment for children under 5, as well as pregnant and nursing women, and addressed preventable illnesses that exacerbate malnutrition. In addition, families received cash assistance to meet their basic food needs.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

Escalating Hunger and Malnutrition: Humanitarian assistance, including food and cash, has been critical to alleviating hunger and malnutrition in Somalia. With less than 25% of the population currently receiving food assistance, 4.4 million people are projected to face crisis levels of hunger. A further reduction in assistance will deepen this crisis, especially for the 3.9 million internally displaced persons who depend on food assistance for survival.

Desperate Survival Measures and Economic Collapse: As international assistance decreases and the risk of drought looms, families will be forced to resort to survival strategies, such as selling their last livestock, consuming wild foods, or going into debt. The lack of continued assistance will also hinder families' ability to recover, leaving them trapped in cycles of vulnerability and poverty.

Devastating Health Consequences: The reduction of humanitarian assistance will have severe health impacts, particularly for pregnant women, new mothers, and young children. Without sufficient food assistance, rates of malnutrition will rise, endangering the health, development, and survival of infants and young children. The long-term effects of increased malnutrition will have devastating consequences on the future of Somalia's most vulnerable populations.

Without continued food assistance in Somalia, 3.9 million displaced people will be at risk.

NIGERIA

CONTEXT

Immediate support is critical to prevent a potential food and nutrition crisis in Nigeria, where skyrocketing food prices, the aftermath of severe flooding, and 15 years of insurgency in the northeast are pushing families to their breaking point. According to a 2024 assessment led by the Nigerian government and partner agencies, at least 25 million people need lifesaving food and nutrition assistance across Nigeria—with projections that the number could rise to 33 million by the end of 2025 without urgent assistance. Usually, the need for humanitarian food assistance in Nigeria is lower this time of year because of harvests. Yet, recent flooding and its detrimental impact on harvests and income have meant that more people will not be able to meet their basic food needs, and the country's lean season will start even earlier.

CRS AND PARTNER RESPONSE

CRS has worked across Nigeria for more than 30 years, supporting communities to improve their stability, resilience, and prosperity through agriculture, nutrition, health systems strengthening, and emergency response and recovery. Prior to the recent U.S. government suspension of international assistance, CRS was implementing two active food security, nutrition, and livelihoods projects in Borno State, funded by the U.S. government. These two-year emergency projects aimed to improve the livelihoods of thousands of people living in conflict-affected areas, with CRS on track to reach 34,200 households, or approximately 171,000 people.

Through one of its two-year multi-sectoral emergency projects, CRS has played a pivotal role in operationalizing the new World Health Organization guidelines on the prevention and treatment of acute malnutrition in Borno State. Activities included addressing moderate acute malnutrition among children under 5 years old using the Tom Brown approach—a nutritious food supplement made from locally available ingredients, typically prepared as porridge. CRS has a longstanding history of incorporating Tom Brown into its nutrition programs across Nigeria. In this current project, CRS successfully identified and treated thousands of children suffering from moderate acute malnutrition, helping to rehabilitate their health.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

Escalating Food Insecurity and Malnutrition: Over 33 million people in Nigeria will require food and nutrition assistance during the upcoming lean season, a 25% increase compared to last year. The Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states—already devastated by extremist violence since 2009—will account for 5 million people in need, with 2 million in Borno alone. Without continued U.S. assistance, food insecurity and malnutrition are expected to worsen rapidly, leading to dire consequences for vulnerable populations, particularly children and pregnant or nursing women.

Greater Insecurity and Risk for Outward Migration: Discontinued humanitarian assistance at this especially critical time is likely to fuel further social unrest and gang violence that destabilizes the country and increases the risk of migration. In urban areas, there is high concern of families—including their children—going days without food, begging, and finding themselves pulled into criminal activity by gangs or fleeing abroad. In rural areas, families might be forced to send their children to stay with relatives or to take part in domestic labor as a desperate alternative. Families might also soon be foraging wild foods and/or engaging in environmentally destructive activities, such as charcoal production, that increases the risks of flooding and erosion.

Vulnerability to Storms: The reduction in USAID funding would undermine years-long efforts to strengthen communities' resilience and preparedness activities ahead of the annual hurricane season, which begins in June. With priorities now focused on food and survival, families will have less means to take on measures to mitigate loss and impact ahead of storms.

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GAZA

CONTEXT

The conditions and humanitarian needs of Gazans continue to be dire as the entire population of the Gaza Strip—2.1 million people—relies on humanitarian food assistance to survive. The conflict has led to an immense need for food for an estimated 90% of the population—2 million people—who face acute food insecurity. Gazans have almost no means to access food or earn an income independently. While the delivery of food assistance increased during the recent ceasefire, no humanitarian assistance has entered the Gaza Strip since March 2, 2025, when the Government of Israel announced all borders would be closed to the entry of all goods. Limited cash reserves and insufficient access to financial services hamper the day-to-day operations of organizations, as well as the scale of market-based assistance. Large-scale commercial deliveries are limited and would normally complement humanitarian assistance with nutritious food variety and stimulation for the local economy. Most families are unable to cook food for themselves because of limited cooking fuel or access to safe cooking spaces. Agricultural inputs like seeds are restricted from entering Gaza, preventing people's ability to grow food locally and strengthen nutrition and livelihoods.

CRS AND PARTNER RESPONSE

CRS has operated in Gaza since 1984, including humanitarian efforts in response to the 2014 war and successive conflicts. Since October 2023, CRS and partners have served 1.3 million Gazans with a range of support, including food assistance, cash assistance, bedding and shelter supplies, hygiene supplies, and psychosocial support. Before the USG funding suspension, CRS had an active BHA-funded program that supported market-based assistance to address people's food needs, along with other interventions like water, sanitation, hygiene and shelter.

The compounded challenges of border closures, funding flow issues, and frequently changing approvals by USG will leave approximately 10,400 households, or 62,400 people, without support to meet their critical food needs. In addition, 2,900 households, or 17,400 people, will be deprived of three months of in-kind food assistance. Further, pauses in funding place a financial burden on CRS to deliver 10,000 tents, provided to CRS by BHA, through private resources.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

Heightened Food Insecurity: In the absence of humanitarian food assistance, between 1 to 2 million people across Gaza will face severe hunger through May 2025. In the northern governorates, nearly two-thirds of families went full days without eating in the last 30 days. The discontinued humanitarian assistance will result in child malnutrition, increased illness, and a higher risk of death. Surveys also reported that, in late 2024, many families had resorted to extreme measures like early marriage of both boys and girls or withdrawing children from school to help families earn income. These risky measures are likely to resume in the absence of continued humanitarian food assistance. Further, with local fishing systems uprooted and livestock production almost nonexistent, families will resort to consuming diets that do not meet basic nutritional needs. Some assessments in late 2024 indicated some households are resorting to eating wild foods, such as animal fodder.

In Gaza, without continued food assistance, between 1 to 2 million people will face severe hunger through May 2025.

MALI

CONTEXT

Families in northern Mali, particularly in the Ménaka, Mopti, Timbuktu and Gao regions, are facing severe food insecurity due to conflict, flooding, and disrupted food production and access. Armed conflict prevents people from accessing their farmland and blocks supply routes. Additionally, flooding has destroyed crops, leading to a surge in food prices. By May 2025, between 500,000 and 750,000 people will require humanitarian food assistance due to the compounding effects of these crises.

CRS AND PARTNER RESPONSE

CRS has operated in Mali since 1999, delivering results in highly volatile and difficult operating areas in the country. CRS has supported a mix of projects in the country, including emergency response efforts as well as sustainable development focused on agriculture, household and community resiliency, and women and youth empowerment. Before the suspensions and terminations, CRS had four active USG-funded food security and livelihoods projects covering emergency food assistance, school feeding, and improved agricultural livelihoods and production. Through these projects, CRS was in the process of reaching nearly 44,000 families, or 220,000 people.



Talata fled from her home near Bankass, Mali in November 2019 after armed men attacked her village. She has received support from CRS in a camp for internally displaced persons. Photo by Annika Hammerschlag/CRS

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITHOUT U.S. FOOD ASSISTANCE?

Diminished Livelihoods and Food Sources: Armed conflict prevents people from safely accessing their farms to grow food or carry out livelihood activities. Blockades are leading to food scarcity and major price increases—ranging from 40 to 100% higher in areas of northern Mali. Flooding has impacted 370,000 people and destroyed fields that cannot be replanted, limiting production and food available in markets, and forcing people to migrate.

Deepened Hunger and Malnutrition: People have sold assets, including livestock and farming tools, to buy food, leaving them increasingly dependent on aid. Internally displaced families are already using severe negative coping strategies, and the prevalence of acute malnutrition is spiking. Many households rely on cheap grains and have reduced meal sizes. For displaced families who rely on humanitarian food assistance, they are likely to experience increased gaps in food consumption and malnourishment. Already extremely high, the prevalence of malnutrition will increase, particularly among children under 5 and pregnant women and new mothers, raising the risk of death due to illness and pregnancy-related complications.

Increased Displacement: Reductions in humanitarian food assistance are likely to further drive conflict and displacement, in turn limiting local production as families flee their farms, further increasing their need for humanitarian assistance for food to feed their families.

In Mali, as many as 750,000 people will need humanitarian food assistance by May 2025.