



“What can we do?”:

The role of the UN Security Council in tackling Conflict and Hunger

Introduction

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is normally one of the most influential international political bodies. The primary responsibility of its fifteen members is to ensure international peace and security by identifying threats to peace or acts of aggression and the appropriate responses including, if necessary and as a last resort, the use of force and other measures¹. It is the only UN body with the authority to issue resolutions that are legally binding for its Member States.

Existing relevant frameworks within the UN Security Council

In 2018, the Security Council unanimously adopted the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2417 (UNSCR 2417), which condemns the use of hunger as a method of warfare and recognises the connection between conflict and hunger. The resolution also condemns the “unlawful denial of humanitarian access” and the “willful obstruction of aid deliveries”.

Whilst International Humanitarian Law (IHL) already prohibited the use of hunger as a weapon of war, it was only considered a war crime in international armed conflicts (IACs²). One year after the adoption of UNSCR 2417, the Rome Statute was modified to include the crime of starvation of civilians in Non-International Armed Conflicts (NIACs³). However, by the end of 2024, only 18 States had ratified the amendment, and the use of hunger as a weapon of war remains common practice⁴.

In the following years, the UNSC adopted several other resolutions related to the protection of food systems and continued access to food. Most notably, in 2021 it unanimously approved Resolution 2573, condemning attacks on objects indispensable to survival. Further, in 2024 it approved Resolution 2761, which outlines the parameters of humanitarian exemptions in the case of asset freezes imposed by UN sanction regimes.

Challenges in driving UN Security Council action

Geopolitical interests, lack of operational clarity, and conflicting priorities often prevent collective action to stop perpetrators from harming civilians. This is aggravated by the fact that, despite its global leadership role, the UN Security Council inconsistently addresses, and rarely enforces, International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law in conflict settings⁵.

What can the UN Security Council do to advance the implementation of UNSCR 2417?

- Promote compliance with International Humanitarian Law, and accountability for its violations**
 - The Security Council is mandated to report situations of concern to the International Criminal Court (ICC), such as violations of the 2019 amendment to the Rome Statute
 - Use resolutions, statements and diplomatic pressure to ensure that unimpeded humanitarian access is granted in conflict zones

- Establish commissions of inquiry or fact-finding missions investigating specific situations that could endanger international peace and security, as mandated by the UN Charter⁶
- Consider imposing sanctions against individuals or groups who infringe IHL, deliberately block access to food, destroy food systems, or deny humanitarian access. Ensure that sanctions make provisions to protect the civilian population.

2. Keep conflict-induced hunger on the global agenda

- The UNSC can drive visibility by designating champion Member States to raise awareness and mobilize action, such as members of the Group of Friends of Action on Conflict and Hunger⁷
- Convene regular Council meetings on the topic; Arria-formula meetings on specific contexts, and continue holding informal ambassador-level meetings to discuss relevant reports.

3. Enhance Early Warning Systems

- The UNSC should mandate the provision of clear guidance on evidence collection and reporting mechanisms required to monitor areas at risk, with a focus on preventative action
- Mandate regular reports on the state of food security in conflict-affected areas
- Ensure that key UN agencies, such as WFP and FAO collaborate with conflict-monitoring bodies to provide early warnings about food crises in conflict. OCHA, as the penholder on this agenda, must also play a key role in supporting reporting mechanisms.

4. Drive country-specific implementation of UNSCR 2417

- Timely, accurate, and systematic information about country-specific violations is essential. Current reporting mechanisms, such as the Secretary General's country reports; the annual report on the protection of civilians, and the white papers, must include actionable, specific recommendations
- Clarify the ownership of the topic of conflict-induced hunger in the Secretary General's yearly country reports. Whilst OCHA is the de facto pen holder, this agenda is not its primary concern, so data availability and situational challenges might not be as accurate
- Ensure that the "white papers" include actionable recommendations, to drive context-specific change when famine conditions arise
- Recommendations should encompass a wide range of actors, beyond the UN Security Council, and should therefore be made public. White papers should also focus on prevention, rather than outlining the situation in contexts where the situation has already deteriorated.

Conclusion

Overall, it is key for the UN Security Council to step up its leadership in driving consistent action in the fight against conflict-induced hunger. Clear ownership and guidance, regular early warning reporting on violations, and follow-up on specific actions would renew the credibility of this agenda, and contrast the current climate of impunity.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations (1945). Charter of the United Nations, 1 UNTS XVI, 24 October 1945. Art. 24(1). Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-5>
- 2 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (1977). Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977. Art. 53 <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule53>
- 3 UN General Assembly. (1998). Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (last amended 2021) Art. 8(2)(e)(xix). Available at: https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99_corr/cstatute.htm
- 4 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. (2023). The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum. Rome: FAO, p. 8.
- 5 The Lancet. (2024). Starvation as a weapon of war must stop The Lancet, 403(10434), p.1309. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)00684-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)00684-6/fulltext)
- 6 United Nations. (1945). Charter of the United Nations, 1 UNTS XVI, 24 October 1945. Art. 34(1).
- 7 E. Gillard. (2021). Conflict-induced hunger and the Security Council The State of play three years after the adoption of SCR 2417: Challenges and Opportunities Oxford Institute for Ethics, Laws and Armed Conflict, p. 4-5.