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Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. We're very pleased today to have David Beasley, who is the executive director of the World Food Programme, with us in Ottawa today. He's also, I note, a former member of the South Carolina House of Representatives and former governor of the State of South Carolina.

We'd like to welcome you, Mr. Beasley. We'll give you about eight minutes for introductory remarks, and then we'll go to a round of questions from each of the parties.

Mr. David Beasley (Executive Director, World Food Programme): Thank you very much. It's great to be here.

I was trying, really, to determine how I should go forward when we have so many tragedies around the world. We're facing so many wars, conflicts and disasters, where do you start? Let's take it from a global perspective, maybe.

I took this role a year and a half ago, kicking and screaming—and reluctantly, quite frankly, given the dynamics of the world—but here we are a year and a half later. The world had been making so much progress with regard to reducing hunger around the world over the past, really, 200 years, and particularly in the last 50 years. In the last two years, the hunger rate has spiked. It's gone from 777 million to 821 million. The more complex, sad news is that the severe hunger rate—these are people literally marching toward the brink of starvation, who don't know where their next meal is—has risen from what was 80 million to 124 million in just two years. The fundamental question would be: What's the driving cause?

The number one driving cause is, of course, manmade conflict, whether you talk about Yemen or complex deterioration inside a country like Venezuela, or whether you're talking about Syria, Iraq, Somalia, northeast Nigeria or South Sudan. We're now feeding or assisting over 90 million people on any given day.

When I got to the World Food Programme, we were facing major financial issues. The United States—this new administration—was talking about cutting back. We were facing four famines around the world. We were able to avert famines, and of course, we were able to convince the United States that international aid was critical not only to the national security interests of any particular nation but also for world peace and stability. The good news is that donors around the world, including the United States, have not backed down but have stepped up. We've raised about $1 billion extra, but we're still a couple of billion dollars short.

The number two driving force is climate extremes. We can go from country to country and showcase where and how those have impacts. Where you have destabilization plus climate extremes, that is an absolute formula for migration and disintegration of many different dynamics within a culture. You might see that particularly in the Central and South America region, and you may particularly notice that in the Sahel, or the Greater Sahel region from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, as people are migrating, moving.

What we know at the World Food Programme is that people don't want to leave. People don't just leave their homes. I don't care whether they're left-wing, right-wing, whatever their colour, their race, their religion or whatever, they want to be home. When they don't have food security, every 1% increase in food insecurity is a 2% increase in migration. When you feed 90-some million people on any given day, you learn a lot about people. You know what they're thinking, their habits, their problems, their issues. We do extensive surveying and analytics with the people we are feeding on any given day around the world. There are common themes.

For example, let me talk about Syria, out of which there was migration into Europe. This is a country of some 20 million people, and that has obviously been going down now, as five million or six million are in the surrounding neighbourhood, so to speak, and then several million made it up into Europe, with a small infiltration by extremist groups. The cost to us of supporting or feeding a Syrian inside Syria is about 50¢ per day. That's almost double what the normal cost would be, but it's a war zone and our logistical costs are higher. You can feed people pretty inexpensively when you buy as much food as we do.

For that same Syrian, who does not want to be in Berlin, who does not want to be in Brussels, the humanitarian pack is theirs for 50 euros per day. That's one hundred times more expensive. They don't want to be there. In fact, they will move two, three, four times inside their home country before they'll finally leave, whether they go to Jordan or Lebanon or Turkey or wherever they can get access to.

It's really no different from what you would see in Venezuela and what's taking place, with one million now in Colombia and 800,000 in Ecuador. Then you add in the complexity of the dry corridor and the drought that's taking place. In fact, there was a news story today on CNN Politics that showed that people are missing the point that a lot of what's driving the caravan is hunger because of the drought in El Salvador, in Honduras, in Nicaragua, and in Guatemala.

● (1310)

These are issues that need to be addressed. This is where I think the World Food Programme, with our experience, is saying we can operate in emergency conditions. No one can do that better than we can. However, you're not addressing the root cause of the problem. If we could address the root cause, then in my opinion we could eliminate migration by necessity and end up with migration by choice. That's a pleasant discussion.

As I say to my friends, Republicans and Democrats in Washington, once they agree to disagree—because they're consuming 100% of their time on whether there should be a wall and what the immigration policy should be—why don't they just respectfully decide to lay that aside? Why don't we come together on addressing the root cause of the problem so that it is no longer a serious, complex issue?

The World Food Programme is mostly seen as humanitarian emergency relief, when in fact, though we are the world's largest operation, we bring to the table the development context for food security. This is why it's so important to work with Canada: Canada clearly understands the role of the humanitarian and development nexus. The old silos that were created back in the 1960s and 1970s—there was a development silo and a humanitarian emergency sort of response silo—need to be broken down to give the team the flexibility to address more complex situations than there were before.

It's not quite so simple a silo now in how we need to address food security issues in areas that differ, whether it's in Central and South America, the Sahel or the greater Sahel region where we have 500 million people, not just 20 million. I think it was on France 24 television where I said that if you think you're worried about 20 million, wait until the 500 million destabilize. ISIS, al Qaeda, Boko Haram and al Shabaab are trying to exploit the fragility. You have fragile governments and then you have climate extremes coming upon the people there. It's a very complex situation but we have solutions. We know that when we come in with flexible multi-year funding for a long-term solution, we can solve the problems. We can show you example after example because there's a lot of donor fatigue out there.

You can go into some of the African countries where some of the donors say they've been putting money there for 30, 40 or 50 years, whether through the United Nations or international aid, and there's nothing to show for it. We're saying that for every dollar we spend, we want, number one, an exit strategy. In other words, how do we achieve objectives so we're no longer needed there? We create sustainability and self-sufficiency. We've worked with food-for-asset types of programs in these very fragile areas.

What we're doing with this, and with school meals, gender parity and gender empowerment for women and girls in all of these programs around the world, is quite remarkable and Canada is a major player in helping us lead the way. We're here to say thank you. Thank you very much for that partnership. We have a lot more to do. That's one of the reasons we wanted to be here, to really showcase the realities of how you're investing your money. I can answer any of your questions to showcase why we believe it's a good investment, but we need to do more.

As my friends in the United States said, "We're not backing down. You go tell our friends in Canada and in Europe to do more with us."

Thank you.

● (1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that testimony.

We are a subcommittee on human rights, so for the questioning, please focus on the intersection of human rights and food security as well.

We will start our first seven-minute round with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Mr. Beasley, thank you. You're doing angels' work. I really appreciate it.

I find it fascinating that no matter how long we live, some things never change. One of the foundational families of the scriptures, Jacob and his sons, ended up in Goshen because of food insecurity and we're still talking about it today.

I want to ask you about your donors. Are they all nation-states or do you have some of the large foundations also donating to WFP?

Mr. David Beasley: It's mostly states. In fact, one of the areas where the World Food Programme has done very little is in private sector fundraising. I'm bringing that now to the table. We're beginning to analyze and evaluate.

On an amortized, annualized basis, I don't think we would be able to see substantial amounts—billions of dollars—from the private sector, notwithstanding going into the Internet and touching millennials. We believe that if you could touch half a billion millennials and get them to give $2 per year, that would pick up $1 billion.

I arrived almost 20 months ago. We're now raising $4 million more per day than we were over a year ago. That's a little over $1 billion. That's come primarily from about 10 countries. We have been able to touch into countries that historically have not been giving, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Now we've been able to convince them that they must give and they're stepping up. China is stepping up more than they ever have. Russia is stepping up a little more than they ever have. We're trying to do more.

The private sector is going to be the long-term solution for on-the-ground partnership with us that's not just money but expertise and economic empowerment.

Mr. David Sweet: That's the sustainability part you were talking about.

Mr. David Beasley: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: Do you find that most of the nations keep their pledges? You mentioned some positive stuff about others—

Mr. David Beasley: I heard a lot of stories when I got there, but so far it's been really good.

I'm going to just give you a few.

The United States was giving us about $1.8 billion, and of course, everybody was concerned that the Trump administration was going to zero out, but now we're at almost $2.75 billion with the United States. We have picked up about $1 billion more per year.

With Germany, I've been spending a lot of time with our mutual friends in the Bundestag explaining why they must be engaged and why it can't just be humanitarian relief. There has to be development in the context, because if you don't have food security, almost nothing else matters. Germany stepped up a couple of hundred million more. They were at $65 million six years ago, and they're now at $800 million.

The U.K. has gone from $300 million or $400 million to about $600 million.

The Nordic countries on a per capita basis are doing really well.

France gives about $30 million. It's an issue. They should step up more, particularly with the Sahel and the francophone countries.

The U.A.E. and the Saudis have really stepped up, but I think that started when.... I don't know if you remember, but a year ago there was a brutal *60 Minutes* story on the Yemen war. I had just come out of the field, and it really was brutal on the Saudis. For whatever reason, they came around. That's improved. The U.A.E. has been really remarkable to work with in the last year.

● (1320)

Mr. David Sweet: We're getting your message that migration is a result of the lack of food security, and if you help there, it's much more effective economically than it is to do it after the disaster has happened.

Perhaps you could focus the rest of the time you have for me on two areas we have been studying, if our time doesn't run out.

The first one is Bangladesh and the Rohingya. We've studied long and hard on that. What is the World Food Programme doing there? Also, is Venezuela accepting some help from you?

Mr. David Beasley: I just came out of the field, by the way, in Yemen. Yemen is a disaster. We could spend hours on the humanitarian disaster there and what needs to be done.

As for the Rohingya, I was just in Cox's Bazar about five weeks ago. We went from a small number of people to a million people in just a few months. While we're not in charge of the camps, we have the engineering. Not many people realize how much the World Food Programme does. We're a logistics hub for the United Nations and for the engineering that takes place for bridges, airplanes, trucks, ships and everything, because we're carrying the supplies in for everybody, pretty much.

The camp in Cox's Bazar was just.... You know the situation. It's pretty bad. If you have ever been there or seen the pictures, we were concerned for several hundred thousand people whose lives were at risk just from the rainy season coming. We came in and did everything we possibly could to secure up land sites and do some piping, bridging and things of that nature. We made a lot of progress and a lot of headway.

Quite frankly, everybody talked about going back. If I can just speak frankly, I can't imagine people going back. What I heard, I mean, from mother to mother to mother and from some fathers who survived and weren't killed, were stories of how their children were killed right before their very own eyes, of women being raped, and of people being burned alive. Would you go back to that? I just don't see it. There'll be some going back. There'll be certain promises made, but I don't see it. I hope that one day they can go back.

What we've done is worked on digitizing every single Rohingya so that they'll have identification digitized with biometrics and identification that gives them some sense of identity for the first time in their lives. We are working with all the different UN and international organizations to do what we can to stabilize the environment there.

Of course, the Bangladesh military pretty much oversees the operations there. I've been meeting with, of course, the prime minister. He has elections coming up, and that creates dynamics in this situation, not to get into too much of that right here, because they are a host country. What we're trying to do is minimize the negative consequences on the local community, because this is an issue in itself.

The environmental impact is a whole different discussion, but you can imagine a country that's made a lot of headway in the last 25 years. There are not many jobs. You can obviously understand the politics about not allowing Rohingya to come into the communities and have jobs. We're working through a lot of these issues, but it's a sad, sad state of affairs.

The Chair: Sadly, we'll have to leave it there, but maybe we'll be able to get back to it in future questions.

Mr. David Beasley: Okay. I will put Venezuela in somewhere.

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Khalid for seven minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Beasley, for coming in today and for your very important testimony.

You touched on this in your opening remarks, and I want hear your views on the ever-growing crisis that is happening in Yemen where 15 million people, as per the WFP, are in food crisis, in an emergency. Can you tell us what is the situation on the ground? What is causing this? What can Canada do to provide assistance to these over 15 million people who are facing this crisis and famine?

Mr. David Beasley: Yes, I was just on the ground in Yemen for several days in Aden, Sana'a and Hudaydah. If you can imagine the dangers of going to Hudaydah, everybody, UN security, said, "You can't go to Hudaydah." I said that I have to go to Hudaydah. I said that I have to stand in that port and I have to let the world see that we have to protect this port at all costs because if this port shuts down, we will have an unprecedented catastrophe. People have been saying that Yemen is on the verge of catastrophe and I have said that is totally untrue—it is a catastrophe. Every 10 to 11 minutes a child is dying now. We were assisting about eight million people as of a few weeks ago on any given day. Those were severely hungry people who literally were marching toward the brink of starvation.

Today, based on our new numbers, the severe hunger rate has jumped to between 15 million and 16 million people. Now the question you have to ask is what is driving the substantial increase, because the war has been there for several years. This is a country that was already very impoverished, the stunting rate was already one of the highest in the world. The rial had already been depreciated since 20 years ago from 70:1 to 215:1 the day before the war started, approximately. When I was there a few weeks ago it was 720:1. So you can imagine the purchasing power, assuming there is anything to buy, coupled with the fact that you have no money because there are no jobs. Eight million livelihoods have been destroyed since the war began and 1.2 million civil servants have received almost no pay in the past three years. There is no liquidity in the marketplace.

When you look at the last three months, the hunger rate has spiked 3.6 million in the last three months and 1.6 million in the last 30 days. It's the same war. Nothing has really changed, so what's happening now? There is no liquidity anymore. There is no money, and nobody in the outside world wants to give credit anymore. It is a perfect storm.

We've been able to avert famine in spite of the fights that we've had. A year ago we were fighting. I was hard on the Saudis. They had the blockade, and weren't providing money for the humanitarian consequence, so I went after them pretty hard internationally. The Houthis were so excited, "We're so glad you're jumping on the Saudis." I said, "Let me tell you something. I am not taking sides. This is about human rights, human dignity, and when you cross that line, I will be on your back too. It's just a matter of when, if you do it."

Three weeks ago I met with the Houthis and I was blistering them pretty hard because of lack of access. We eliminated or resolved the blockade issue with the Saudis. They stepped up with funding. The U.A.E., by the way, has been quite remarkable to work with in the last year. There has been an amazing change. They actually call us and ask, "What can we do? Is there anything we are not doing right that we can do better?" That's other than the issue of the war itself, of course. That's the driving dynamic here. The Houthis, who control the access that we need in most of these areas where most of the people are, have been a problem in terms of access, lack of visas that we need for the number of people and the types of people we need, coupled with the equipment that we need. When you're feeding eight million people on any given day, it takes a lot of movement of stuff.

Now I can honestly say, and I've met with the Houthi leadership—the Houthis are not a simple dynamic; there are different Houthi leaders—and some of them have made a positive step forward in the last few weeks. I explained to them that I planned to tell the people in the world that people are going to be dying because they're not giving us the access and I need for them to work with us, and many have. On the other hand, there are some Houthis who don't care. They don't care at all.

● (1325)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: What can Canada do to provide assistance on the ground? We talk about providing humanitarian aid for food, etc., but do you think that's a band-aid solution to the Yemen problem? How can we provide more long-term sustainability, especially for food security, as a country?

Mr. David Beasley: There are several things here. First and foremost, Canada has been helping us with, I think, $29 million regarding Yemen just in the past two years. Canada has really helped us in the area of school children, with nutrition, with lactating and pregnant women and especially with little girls. Canada has been great.

Long term, there is a whole different dynamic here. Let me add that—notwithstanding the war coming to an end; obviously, that's the best solution—the problem you have now is that you cannot solve the humanitarian crisis with a humanitarian solution. It is too great. You must inject liquidity into the marketplace. We have a group of economists on our teams because economies determine food prices and food prices determine civil unrest. We know this stuff.

I took my number one economist with me into Yemen. We met with the governor of the Central Bank of Yemen, along with other leaders of the country, like the Government of Yemen and the de facto leaders in other places. We explained to them that this was no longer a humanitarian solution alone, that there must be an injection of approximately $200 million U.S. of liquidity into the marketplace, and how that needs to be done to stabilize the rial. The rial needs to come back down to somewhere below 450:1 to create economic viability again in the marketplace, because 90% of the food and supplies for Yemen come from the outside world. There's no longer any economy on the inside, so they can't grow their own food. They can't provide their own supplies. It is a disaster.

● (1330)

The Chair: Sorry, that's the end of the time.

We will go to Ms. Hardcastle for another seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to use my time to hear a little bit more about the safeguards you have in place to ensure that a corrupt government or a rebel faction isn't misusing the food program or tying food to political support or feeding the military first. I'm sure you can go into some of the ways you've....

Mr. David Beasley: Sure. We could actually spend hours on that. It's very important, because no longer are we just bringing in commodities in humanitarian short-term emergencies. We're now doing cash-based transfers. We're the world's largest in the cash-based transfer system. We now provide a little bit less than $2 billion in cash-based transfer systems.

The way we do that is quite remarkable in itself; I don't know how much time we'll have to get into that. Whether you're doing cash-based transfers or whether you're doing commodities, having the monitoring systems in place is critical for assessing and monitoring. We run into this every single day. You can imagine certain places, particularly in complex war areas, where opposition forces don't want you to have access. They want to be able to deliver the food. Of course, what can happen with that? We're like, "No. We don't do that. Here's the standard. We're neutral. We will feed all innocent people of any region. We don't care. Any other questions?"

In Yemen we've run into issues. In Syria we might run into issues, or in places like South Sudan or Nigeria or Somalia or DRC. Each place is different. We have systems in place to minimize those risks. I mean, we're not in the nicest areas in the world. We're in the toughest places in the world, areas fraught with corruption and disintegration of the normal laws of transparency, rule of law, etc. Our teams put in the monitoring and put what we need in place. My teams understand; when they suspect anything, immediately they bring it to the attention of donors and let them know, because what you're going to run into is this: How do we react when we find these types of problems, and what systems do we have in place to minimize that risk?

With the cash-based transfer systems, for example, we have now created an entire new division on enterprise risk. When you're putting out a couple of billion dollars in cash, for example, it's about how we do it and where we do it. We use biometrics now, whether it's eye-scanning or fingerprinting, and everyplace we go we integrate this new technology.

When I arrived, there were a couple of things I was a little shocked about in the UN system. I never was inside the UN system. That was why I was a little bit amazed that I ended up taking this role, because I always thought the UN was not as effective as it could be. It's not, but it was a lot better than I thought it was. I was, "Here's where the UN ought to be, and here's where I thought it was"; I think it was somewhere in between.

The World Food Programme is a remarkable operation. I mean, they get it done. The two things, two areas, that concerned me were the lack of digitization in the UN system and gender parity. I was just shocked that the UN was still having the discussion about gender parity in the year 2017, when I arrived. I was like, "Really? You're still talking about this?"

At the World Food Programme, we like to think that we're the leader in women's empowerment. We use the cash-based transfer system to substantially increase and improve women's opportunities in communities. In the commodity field, where we use food for cash, for assets, and things like that, such as in the Sahel, when we work with the women, you can be assured that food goes where it needs to go. The women will make sure that their little girls and little boys get the food.

When we integrate biometrics and digitization, we find there's a saving of between 5% and 35%. It eliminates duplication. You can imagine that if you're in a country with a million refugees, and you don't have enough money to give everyone full rations, I don't care what; every mother's going to look for a way to get more rations, and you don't blame them. But authenticity, integrity of the systems—we put the monitoring systems in place.

I can tell you from experience that when we deal with the women, they make sure they take that money and they buy the right food and they get it to the children. We have established an app that we're trying in certain places. In Lebanon, for instance, the old way was to just bring in food. You have a million and more refugees inside Lebanon. We came in and established 500 stores. The women, primarily Palestinian refugees, will come in and get the fingerprint ID and go into a store. One-third of the food they buy is produced locally, which helps the local economy. One-third is processed locally, which helps the local economy. One-third comes from imports.

● (1335)

We take the opportunity to leverage the dollar to maximize the benefits for dignity and empowerment of the families, as well as to try to improve the economics of an already very difficult situation for the hosting country, in order to minimize the burden upon them. Look at Lebanon and Jordan and the burden they've shouldered in the last few years. We cannot afford for Jordan or Lebanon to collapse. Turkey, of course, has taken millions of refugees.

We're working to improve the systems in place all the time because institutional integrity is critical. When you're feeding that many people in that many places, you're going to run into issues. There's always someone trying to beat the system somewhere. When we find it, we ask, "What happened? Why didn't we know about it beforehand? What systems change do we need to put in place?" It is that kind of thing.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Beasley, thank you very much. I think we could have listened to you all afternoon.

Thank you for taking the time to be here and for the very informative testimony.

Mr. David Beasley: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now suspend for one minute and then go in camera for committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]