

Deliberately plunged into misery

Worsening grain and fertiliser shortages caused by wars are driving people into starvation

by German Foreign Policy*

The US's ongoing aggression towards Iran and Germany's continued fuelling of the war in Ukraine threaten to drive tens of millions of people into starvation due to a lack of food supplies.

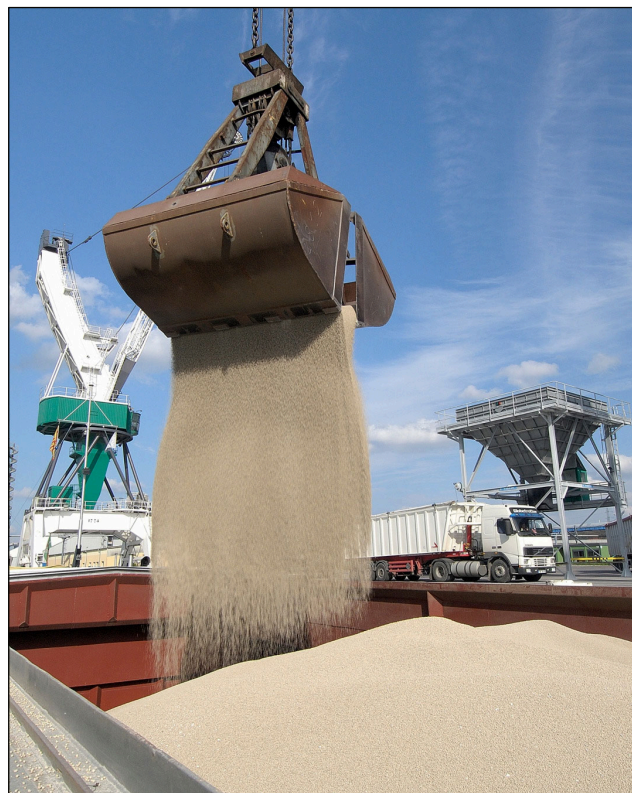
The US's ongoing aggression against Iran, Germany and the EU's fuelling of the war in Ukraine, and the resulting trade blockades are driving the Global South ever deeper into a food crisis. As early as March, the United Nations' *World Food Programme* had warned that the war in Iran alone could plunge around 45 million people worldwide into famine – in addition to the 318 million already suffering from hunger.

Whilst the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is already having a severe impact, this is now compounded by the fact that Ukrainian and Russian grain can hardly be exported via the Black Sea at all; this accounts for around a quarter of global grain exports. For the Global South, the fact that the unequal global trading system has made it dependent on fertilisers and staple foods from countries in the North is having a devastating effect.

At the same time, both the US and Germany and the EU are driven by an open desire to assert their own dominance in the Near and Middle East (the war on Iran) and in Eastern Europe (the war in Ukraine) respectively. In doing so, Washington and Berlin are willing to accept growing hunger in the Global South.

New hunger records

Just a few weeks after the start of the US-Israeli war against Iran, the United Nations *World Food Programme* (WFP) had warned that the war and the resulting disruption to trade could plunge al-



Fertiliser shipment: Millions of innocent people are being driven into starvation by the wars.
(Picture <https://agro-baltic.de>)

most 45 million people into an acute food crisis.¹ They would be added to the alarming figure of around 318 million people who are already suffering from acute hunger. This would mean the total number would actually exceed the previous record set shortly after the start of the war in Ukraine, when 349 million people worldwide were affected by acute hunger.

The WFP's forecast assumed that the war would not be over by the middle of the year and that oil prices would remain above 100 US dollars per barrel. Both scenarios have now materialised; the price of Brent crude stood at around 101 dollars per barrel yesterday, Tuesday [22 September]. At the same time, shipping traffic through the Strait of Hormuz remains severely restricted.

According to insiders, only three cargo ships passed through the strait last Wednesday² – significantly fewer than the current ten-day average of around 17 ships, or even the pre-war average,

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which is reported to have been more than 100 ships per day.³

There is also currently a threat of a partial closure of the *Bab al-Mandab* strait, which leads from the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean near Djibouti and can occasionally be used as an alternative route for exports, particularly from Saudi Arabia.

Dependent on fuels

The hunger crisis is largely attributable to the dependence of global food production on the fossil fuel industry. In the period following the Second World War, a global shift took place: instead of organic fertilisers such as manure and compost, fertilisers based on fossil fuels, such as ammonia and sulphur, were increasingly used to maintain soil nutrients and boost agricultural productivity.

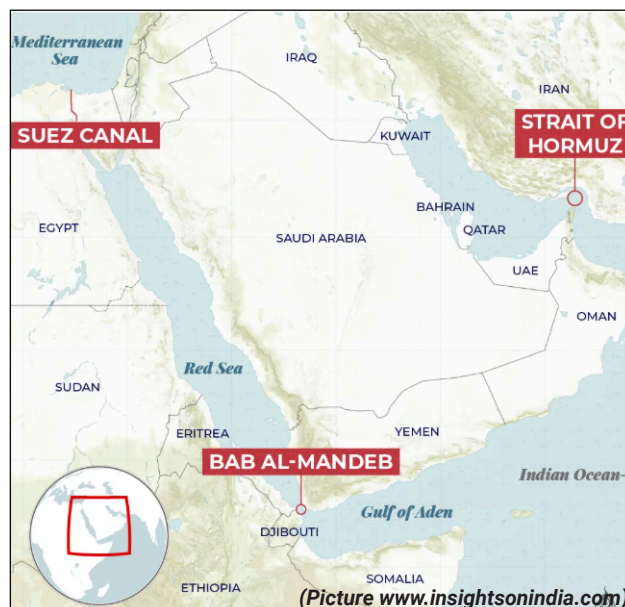
Today, around 30 per cent of the ammonia used worldwide comes from the oil and natural gas-producing regions of the Middle East; Saudi Arabia is, in fact, the world's second-largest exporter of ammonia.⁴ Similarly, around half of the sulphur transported by sea worldwide – which forms the basis for phosphate fertilisers – is shipped through the Strait of Hormuz. This also applies to around 18 per cent of monoammonium phosphate (MAP) and diammonium phosphate (DAP) – two further important fertilisers used to supply crops with phosphorus.

Data from the *World Bank* show a correlation between rising fuel prices and rising fertiliser and food prices. As early as March this year, the World Bank's energy price index rose by 41 per cent, driven by a 45.8 per cent increase in the price of crude oil. In the same month, fertiliser prices rose by 26.2 per cent; food prices, which are usually affected by fertiliser price rises only after a delay, had already increased by 2.7 per cent.

Opportunities squandered

Opportunities to end the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz and thereby restore the world's supply not only of fuel but also of fertilisers were wilfully squandered by the United States, which remains the Federal Republic's most important non-European ally.

Such opportunities were offered by the ceasefire of 7 April, which coincided with the start of negotiations on a *10-point plan* to end the war,



and a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MoU) dated 17 June, which extended the ceasefire by 60 days and further specified the provisions of the 10-point plan.

The 10-point plan initially provided, above all, for an end to hostilities by the US and Israel on all fronts, as well as the recognition of Iranian control over the Strait of Hormuz.⁵ The MoU, now comprising 14 points, stipulated, amongst other things, the lifting of the US naval blockade of Iranian ports and ships and, in return, Iran's opening of the Strait of Hormuz to all other vessels.

In fact, shipping traffic began to recover until the United States resumed hostilities on 6 July, whereupon Iran announced on 18 July that it, too, would no longer fulfil its obligations under the MoU.⁶ The US continues to block Iranian shipping to this day; Iran is retaliating by blocking the Strait of Hormuz to other vessels.

Super El Niño

In addition to the war-induced closure of the Strait of Hormuz and, to some extent, the Bab al-Mandab, El Niño now threatens to plunge a further 50 million people worldwide into acute famine.⁷ El Niño is a weather system that occurs in the Pacific every few years and leads to changes in rainfall patterns worldwide.

The El Niño currently on the horizon is shaping up to be the strongest in at least 70 years; some are already referring to it as a Super El Niño. According to the WFP, even if the El Niño turns out to be less severe than scientists have predicted, around 45 million people are still likely to face food insecurity.

Among the regions most severely affected are Central and South America, the Caribbean and southern Africa. In addition, South and South-East Asia are likely to experience lower than usual rainfall. The worst effects are expected to be felt by the end of 2027; by then, existing food stocks will have been depleted but not yet sufficiently replenished, as El Niño will severely damage this year's harvest.

"The greatest impact on food security" – for example, "in southern Africa – will be felt during the famine period from 2027 to 2028," predicts *Richard Choularton*, head of the Climate and Resilience Service at the WFP.

Unequal trade

The war-induced closure of the Strait of Hormuz is having such a devastating effect on food supplies in the Global South – as *Vikas Rawal*, a professor at the renowned Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, pointed out years ago – because the global trading system has made billions of people worldwide vulnerable to short-term disruptions and fluctuations in the international food supply chain. According to Rawal, decades of globalisation have led to "the Global South becoming a source of food commodities that cannot be produced in industrialised countries".⁸

On the other hand, the countries of the Global South have become dependent on agriculture in the industrialised countries of the North for staple foods. In India, for example, Rawal writes, because of trade liberalisation and a lack of government support, farmers have switched to crops that fetch higher prices on international markets, rather than growing crops that ensure food security within their own country.

This has meant, for instance, that between 2017 and 2019, 68 per cent of the edible oil consumed in India and 17 per cent of its pulses had to be imported. The same applies to fertilisers: In 2020, 30 per cent of India's demand for urea (an ammonia-based fertiliser) and 60 per cent of its demand for diammonium phosphate were met by imports. At the same time, in 2020, 62 million people in India alone were living in severe food insecurity – the highest figure in any single country.

Western interests

In addition to the structural causes (the global trading system) and the climate-related prob-

lems exacerbated by climate change (El Niño), the war in Ukraine has now been added to the mix, alongside the conflicts in the Near and Middle East. The wave of Ukrainian attacks on Russian trading centres and refineries – applauded with great *schadenfreude* even within the German establishment – has led Russia, in retaliation, to once again target Ukrainian maritime trade and attack Ukrainian ports and ships. This is taking its toll on Ukrainian grain exports, which are largely channelled via the Black Sea.

Because Ukraine is increasingly attacking Russian ships with maritime drones, Russian grain exports are also being disrupted. It is reported that both countries recently accounted for a quarter of global grain exports; the importing nations in the Global South are now threatened by a dramatic shortage.⁹

Whilst the structural and climate-related causes of the growing hunger can only be tackled in the long term, the war-related shortfalls can, in principle, be remedied immediately – provided the necessary will is present. But that will is lacking: in the West, the prevailing interest is in asserting its own dominance in the Middle East (the war in Iran) and in Eastern Europe (the war in Ukraine). Neither Washington nor Berlin is interested in the fight against hunger.

Source: <https://www.german-foreign-policy.com/news/detail/10550>, 23 September 2026

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

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- 3 Stephen Quillen: How much oil is going through Hormuz? Why data doesn't match US claims. *aljazeera.com* 03 September 2026.
- 4 Adam Hanieh: The coming global food crisis. *ft.com* 18 April 2026
- 5 Xinhua: What's in Iran's 10-point proposal in negotiations with US? *globaltimes.cn* 08 April 2026.
- 6 Middle East Eye Staff: Iran declares Islamabad agreement suspended, blames US violations. *mideasteye.net* 18 July 2026.
- 7 Fiona Harvey: El Niño could push 50m people into acute hunger before end of next year. *theguardian.com* 05 August 2026.
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- 9 Schwarzes Meer als „anderes Hormuz“. *orf.at* 21 September 2026