

# Famines

A famine is an acute episode of extreme hunger that results in excess mortality due to starvation or hunger-induced diseases.

It is this crisis characteristic that distinguishes it from persistent malnutrition, the term 'famine' can mean different things to different people and has evolved over time. It is only in recent years that more precise, measurable definitions – in terms of mortality rates, food consumption and physical signs of malnutrition – have been developed.

But despite these ambiguities, it is nonetheless very clear that in recent decades the presence of major life-taking famines has diminished significantly and abruptly as compared to earlier eras. This is not in any way to underplay the very real risk facing the roughly 80 million people currently living in a state of crisis-level food insecurity and therefore requiring urgent action. Nevertheless, the parts of the world that continue to be at risk of famine represent a much more limited geographic area than in previous eras, and those famines that have occurred recently have typically been *far* less deadly.



Famines have always occurred as the result of a complex mix of 'technical' and 'political' factors, but the developments of the modern industrial era have generally reduced the salience of natural constraints in causing famine. This includes many developments, such as the increasing availability of food per person, made possible through increasing agricultural yields; improvements in healthcare and sanitation; increased trade; reduced food prices and food price volatility; as well as reductions in the number of people living in extreme poverty. Over time, famines have become increasingly "man-made"-phenomena, becoming more clearly attributable to political causes, including non-democratic government and conflict. Paradoxically, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century famine was virtually eradicated from most of the world, whilst over the same period there occurred some of the worst famines in recorded history. This is because many of the major famines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the outcome of wars or totalitarian regimes. As such, the waning of the very high levels of warfare over the last decades (as seen in the reduced number of battle deaths in recent times) and the spread of democratic institutions has also played a large part in the substantial reduction in famine mortality witnessed in recent decades.

Emergency food aid provided by relief agencies continues to play a crucial role in preventing loss of life, and the international relief community has recently developed much better monitoring systems, such as the Famine Early Warning System, which has allowed for greater preparation and more timely interventions. Where poor harvests are the main cause of famine, as in Niger in 2005, relief provision tends to prevent marked increases in mortality. It is the presence of conflict, or abuses of political power that can block food supplies reaching populations which represents the most pertinent trigger of 'death-dealing' famines today.

Thus, overall, we can see in the rapid decline of famine mortality one of the great accomplishments of our era, representing technological progress, economic development and the spread of stable democracies. Viewed in this light, however, it also serves to highlight the appalling continued presence of famines which are, in the modern world, entirely man-made.

**Find words in the text that match the definitions below.**

1. Famine (paragraph 1) (two words):
2. Measure, quantity (paragraph 2):
3. In spite of (paragraph 3)
4. However (paragraph 3) (two words):
5. Fallen (paragraph 3):
6. Represent (something) as being less important than it really is (paragraph 3):
7. Approximately (paragraph 3):
8. So (paragraph 3):
9. Advances (paragraph 4):
10. Prominence (paragraph 4):
11. Limitations, restrictions (paragraph 4):
12. The quality of being able to be obtained (paragraph 4):
13. Productions (paragraph 4):
14. Quality of changing rapidly and unpredictably (paragraph 4):
15. While, whereas (paragraph 4):
16. Result (paragraph 4):
17. Decrease, decline (paragraph 4):
18. Increase, proliferation (paragraph 4):
19. Seen (paragraph 4):
20. Financial assistance (paragraph 5):
21. Occurring sufficiently early (paragraph 5):
22. Gathering of crops (paragraph 5):
23. Activate (paragraph 5):
24. In this way (paragraph 6):
25. In general (paragraph 6):
26. Achievements (paragraph 6):
27. Draw special attention to (paragraph 6):
28. Terrible (paragraph 6):
29. Totally (paragraph 6):

**Mark these sentences as T (True) or F (False)**

1. A famine occurs when people don't have enough to eat.
2. There is only one definition of famine.
3. The number of starving people is constantly increasing.
4. There is a number of factors that contribute to a diminishing famine.
5. Most famines are due to political causes.
6. Not much is being done to prevent deadly famines.
7. In today's world most famines are the result of human intervention.