

# The Biden administration's shameful weaponization of food aid

The Biden Administration has done more damage to the international norms of humanitarian law and food security than any other U.S. government in recent history.

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STARVING AND ANGRY PALESTINIANS LINE UP TO RECEIVE FREE MEALS DURING THE MUSLIM HOLY MONTH OF RAMADAN, AT JABALIA REFUGEE CAMP IN THE GAZA STRIP, ON MARCH 27, 2024. (PHOTO: © MAHMOUD ISSA/DPA VIA ZUMA PRESS/APA IMAGES)

The week of December 23, FEWSNet, an independently run famine reporting service funded by the United States government, updated its projections for impending famine in northern Gaza. The U.S. Ambassador to Israel publicly criticized the population figures used, and the update promptly disappeared from public view, apparently upon instructions from U.S. government officials.

This recent [censorship battle](#) over whether to call [starvation in Gaza](#) a famine is compromising United States credibility on issues where the U.S. has led the world for decades. A half-century ago, the U.S. helped forge a global consensus on norms to guide how the world responds to food crises, including that food not be used as a weapon. Now, U.S. officials are censoring independent reporting of starvation in Gaza resulting from Israel withholding food supplies from northern Gaza.

1974 was a crucial year for forging this new consensus. The year started out badly. In one of the low points in the otherwise proud history of U.S. humanitarian assistance, the U.S. Government indeed used food as a weapon, retaliating against the young government of Bangladesh by stopping food aid shipments in the midst of that country's worst food crisis since independence. As many as 1.5 million people may have starved to death in that famine. [US food aid stopped because of a dispute](#) over Bangladesh's trade relations with Cuba.

This followed on the Nixon/Kissinger policy during that country's war of independence, three years earlier, of ignoring the terrible civilian human rights abuses and death toll inflicted by the military forces of a U.S. ally. Pakistan was a strong U.S. ally, its president a friend of President Nixon, and Pakistan was in the middle of secretly negotiating the China opening that took place a few months later. [U.S. policy was willing to pay the price of a terrible humanitarian disaster](#) inflicted by Pakistan's army on Bangladesh's civilian population by a close ally in order for President Nixon to achieve his foreign policy triumph on China.

That earlier Bangladesh disaster was a precursor to the U.S. withholding food aid during the 1974 famine. But the U.S. was not alone in 1974 in pursuing shameful policies that abetted famine. Emperor Haile Salassie's failure to address or even recognize a famine in Ethiopia led to a Communist takeover there.

But at the end of 1974, the nations of the world represented at the UN's [World Food Conference](#) established a new set of norms, institutions, and aspirations to guide global food security. And three years later, despite then-Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz's contention at the 1974 conference that food was a powerful weapon in the U.S. arsenal, the U.S. along with the rest of the world outlawed the use of food as a weapon in protocols to the Geneva Conventions. This norm was recently reinforced by unanimous [Security Council resolution](#) (2018), U.S. [Senate resolution](#) (2022) and a [joint UN communique](#) led by the U.S. (2023).

A decade after that World Food Conference, when Ethiopia faced another famine, these norms were honored by one of America's staunchest anti-Communist Presidents. President Ronald Reagan, deciding that starving people in Ethiopia would get U.S. food aid in spite of their Communist government, declared that "[a hungry child knows no politics.](#)"

That Ethiopian famine was part of a broader African food emergency in the mid-1980s, which led the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to start the [Famine Early Warning System](#) (FEWS). FEWS started as, and remains, an independent analytical and early warning

service for the global food and humanitarian community under a series of USAID contract and grant agreements. As a former USAID employee, I frequently relied on FEWS estimates and information during my 38-year career and had close FEWS colleagues over much of that time as well. I know – even in environments of great uncertainty and inadequate data – how carefully and impartially FEWS analysts weigh the information they have access to in making their most informed judgments.

Since its adoption by the UN in 2004, the [Integrated Food Security Phase System \(IPC\) famine scale](#) has been the standard for early warning, and that’s the system used by FEWS in their most recent Gaza update. A FEWS declaration of famine also requires validation by an independent group of global food security experts called a Famine Review Committee. FEWS analysts are careful in using this system and making their assessments because that’s their job, but also because they know that – whenever and wherever they declare conditions approaching famine – powerful people and institutions will attack their analysis, as the U.S. Ambassador to Israel Jack Lew and USAID have just done.

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The war in Gaza has had many casualties, including dead, captive, displaced, and mourning Palestinians, Israelis, and Lebanese. One additional casualty is the global commitment to the norms of international human rights, the law of war, and international humanitarian law for which the U.S. spent so much effort building consensus since the end of the Second World War. By enabling Israel’s disregard for these norms, the Biden Administration has made it difficult if not impossible to credibly call out other governments, such as Russia, when they flagrantly violate them.

Now another casualty is the reputation of FEWS as well as of Ambassador Lew, one of America’s finest senior public servants. Ambassador Lew [attacked the latest FEWS Gaza update as “irresponsible”](#) the week of December 23, questioning the population figures used in its analysis. FEWS uses the best available figures for population and humanitarian supplies, based on their technical judgment regarding accessible data. This is a not uncommon technical issue in some countries that FEWS has reported on over the years. In addition, the IPC scale FEWS uses to determine famine conditions is on a per-10,000 people basis, so the total population would not matter in determining whether or not famine conditions prevail. FEWS quickly withdrew the update [under apparent pressure from USAID officials](#).

It’s noteworthy that — since May — [FEWS updates have already been projecting impending famine](#), absent increased humanitarian food shipments reaching Gaza, and the [Famine Review Committee](#) in November projected impending famine for parts of Gaza. These findings and projections are fully consistent with what the most respected voices in the [humanitarian community have been warning of for months](#) as a consequence of Israel’s failure to permit major increases and predictability in humanitarian supply.

This censorship of a careful technical update, relying on global standards and careful review, further erodes the norms of global food security, undermining any pretense of an impartial U.S.

government assessment of Gaza's humanitarian crisis. This follows on the Biden Administration's failure to enforce U.S. law and policy following the October [Austin-Blinken letter](#) to the Israeli government threatening cessation of arms shipments to countries impeding humanitarian aid.

The outgoing Biden Administration has a choice: It can leave office having done more damage to the international norms of humanitarian law and food security than any other recent administration, or it can return to honoring the norms that previous Administrations of both parties upheld and go on record calling out Israel as a violator of basic humanitarian norms rather than censoring reports identifying famine as a result of those Israeli actions.

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