

House Foreign Affairs Committee

Chairman Edward Royce (R., Calif.) and Andrew Natsios
June 12, 2013

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of a portion of an exchange that took place during a House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing.



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Rep. Edward Royce: Let me go to Mr. Natsios for a question about emergency aid to Syria that might make my point and your point here. The majority of food aid we have been discussing is through the Department of Agriculture's Food for Peace. Now there is a small, separate emergency food security program that USAID set up. This emergency program allows for cash resources to be used for local and regional purchases of food and food vouchers, and as I understand it, if not for the flexibility of that program, USAID would not have been able to launch a rapid food response to the Syrian crisis, and here's why, because it's a very stark contrast.

The first shipment, U.S. food shipment, just arrived in the region in Syria. Just arrived two weeks ago. That's two years after the crisis began. But even with this shipment, it is now the case that trucking it into the population in need, because of the difficulties of doing that, it's not conceivable to move major portions of food by truck into those regions on a daily basis because there's a daily assault by the Syrian military units, so that isn't likely to happen.

So this old structure, you know, frankly, comes two years late and now the food aid is in country, but how do you get it to the region most in need, to those most in need? So with a more flexible program, it seems to me, we've been able to respond quickly, we've been able to maintain access and help keep local markets running, and reduce the probability of aid dependency over the long-term. But I'd like to just ask you for your thoughts on that, Mr. Natsios.

Mr. Andrew Natsios: Well, this goes back, Mr. Chairman, to this comment of [Amartya Sen] that when you have a 7,000 mile supply chain, a lot of things can happen along the way. It's not just in the country. We had pirates in Somalia steal or take two ships. They pirated two ships of food aid from the World Food Program over a number of years and we never saw the—another shipment of food sank in a storm.

The warehouses down in Galveston, we were crossing our fingers when Hurricane Katrina—it barely missed those warehouses. We would have had people die

because those warehouses had been destroyed. They weren't, but it was very close. So the longer the supply chain, the more bad things can happen, but particularly the most serious problem we face is in civil wars where there's food insecurity.

And most of the food now, 82% of all food from Food for Peace is now going to emergencies, which is usually civil wars and famines. Most famines are also an offshoot of civil wars. The two things are a toxic mix with each other. And what usually happens is one side sees the food coming in, because it's very visible. You can't hide 100,000 tons of food. You can't ship it electronically through a banking system, which you can do with cash, to an NGO doing local vouchers, for example. It's a giant red flag. And if the enemy—if a particular side in the civil war wants to starve their opponents to death, the way you do is you blow up the food shipments.

And this is not new. The Sudanese government starved hundreds of thousands of southerners to death during the Sudanese civil war, which killed four million people over 50 years. There were two civil wars, actually. And a lot of those people died of starvation because the government used a very long supply chain, the logistical system to get food in, to simply stop the shipments.

Mengistu did the same thing, the Marxist dictator of Ethiopia, in 1990 and '91, and he was blowing up our shipments of food convoys going into Ethiopia because he was trying to starve the Tigrayans and the Eritreans to death during a famine.

And the way we in fact got around that is I, with congressional approval, used a couple of million dollars in the OFDA budget, which is a separate emergency account. And it's not supposed to be used for food purchase. Not by law. By law we could do it. But the Congress said that's for health, and water, and sanitation, and shelter, the Food for Peace budget's for food. But in this particular case they let us do it.

We bought 20,000 tons of sorghum in a surplus area that Mengistu did not control. We moved it into the famine area. We saved tens of thousands of people's lives by doing that. That's where I got convinced, in that 1990 famine, that this is the best way to approach this. And you, Mr. Chairman, have just pointed out not a 20 year old example, but a current example of exactly the same thing happening in Syria.

[End of recording.]