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Before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus

CONGRESS AND THE FOOD SECURITY TREATY: Ending Hunger with the Aid of International Law

**Testimony of John Teton
Director
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Wednesday, March 3, 2004

Thank you Congresswoman Capps. Advocates of the International Food Security Treaty greatly appreciate your leadership on this issue.

It's fitting to examine the IFST in the context of crisis preparedness. Malnutrition packs the mortality equivalent of a 9/11 attack every 3 1/2 hours, except that most of the victims are small children, all the deaths stretch out in torturous misery for weeks, and there are another quarter-million such attacks, each with 3000 victims who, instead of being killed, are left disabled or seriously ill. This is a real ongoing holocaust with a casualty rate exceeding that wrought by the Third Reich with far more victims each year than result from all the wars and crimes in the world put together. Yet malnutrition could be readily prevented, but for the prevailing fatalistic assumption that the problem is just part of the human condition, beyond our ingenuity to solve it. Clearly, it's not enough to rely as we have solely upon the food reserve, foreign aid, and development remedies.

The Missing Link

The evidence indicates that what's missing is US support for the International Food Security Treaty, which will place the human right to be free from hunger under the protection of enforceable international law. IFST supporter and Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen has pointed out that in the modern era nobody starves unless someone else wants them to. Starvation is a sign of a socio-political cancer which can't be cured or prevented without the socio-political instrument of law. Yet so far anti-hunger law hasn't progressed beyond toothless anti-hunger declarations with no provisions for enforcement.

President Lincoln knew there's a time to move beyond declarations. He and Congress didn't settle for "People have a right not to be enslaved" in the 13th Amendment. Lincoln wrote about the right of equality, "The drafters of the 1776 Declaration did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying equality...They meant simply to declare the right so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit."

For the right of freedom from hunger, circumstances now permit, and common sense now compels. Law without enforcement saves money on courts, police, and prisons, but nobody's recommending that for the laws against double-parking, armed robbery, or rape, for we'd pay dearly in other ways. Omitting enforcement in anti-hunger laws has left a loophole big enough to bulldoze twenty thousand fresh emaciated corpses through every day.

That's why more and more people who aren't immersed in the perverse comfort of pessimism are awakening to the need for the IFST.

The IFST

The whole Treaty, only about 700 words, can be reviewed at treaty.org. In sum, it

"all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

obliges each country:

1) to GUARANTEE AT LEAST MINIMAL NUTRITION for people within its borders who can't get access to it on their own

2) to CONTRIBUTE TO A WORLD FOOD RESERVE AND RESOURCE CENTER for any nation needing emergency help to meet that guarantee.

3) to ESTABLISH AND ENFORCE LAW against the use of hunger as a weapon, and

4) to SUPPORT UN FOOD SECURITY ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS if it's proven that any nation is unable or unwilling to enforce that law on its own.

The IFST must now be brought to the UN with America as a co-sponsor. For our own sake, we Americans must galvanize a coalition of the willing to end hunger. That won't be nearly as hard a sell as some policies we've pursued. The Treaty draws from the wellsprings of virtually all the world's religions. It's stovepipe narrow, focusing exclusively on ending the most terrible and widespread form of suffering which generates the broadest natural sympathy worldwide.

Expert Opinion

Former Congressman and White House Counsel Abner Mikva has written, "(The IFST) makes the utmost sense... (It) must have teeth - another pious platitude in favor of eating will not accomplish the task." Teeth. Lawbreakers don't fear gummers.

Dianne Feinstein has written "(The IFST) could become a major element in stimulating global action to eradicate starvation." And Congresswoman Capps has pointed out that "In the absence of food, other political and economic rights are meaningless. The IFST is a necessary tool in eradicating the ongoing problem of world hunger" and is "the legal realization of the will to address these needs."

Action & Inaction

UN Undersecretary-General Maurice Strong, a senior adviser to the World Bank and leader of the international response to the Sudan famine in the 1980's describes the Treaty as potentially "the centerpiece of a whole system by which the capacity of the Earth to feed its people is translated into a real commitment to do something, because there's no fundamental need for hunger now, and certainly none for starvation. Initiatives like this need to be championed by small groups of people who have strong convictions and are prepared to prevail against a general mood of apathy."

Those small groups include the first Members of Congress to back the IFST. The Treaty now depends upon you as members of this Caucus to bring your colleagues on board, and to help them avoid the pitfalls which have tripped up some in the past, such as waiting on the sidelines for some arbitrary quota to materialize. A cause needs action most before it becomes a cause celebre. Dianne Feinstein and Walter Capps were the first members of the Senate and House to support the IFST. They knew they were elected to design a rail system here, not to hang back till the tracks are all built and there's a rolling train they could jump on. This is not a time for timid buck-passing and non-denial denials of support. Leaders don't hide in a marsh of exaggerated risk fantasies and call it prudence.

Your colleagues should beware of being drawn entirely off course by worthy but weak palliatives. There's merit in each little budget increase for WIC or foreign aid, but tunnel vision for the bonsai trees of charity can blind one to the surrounding sequoia forest of lawlessness. Further, implementation of the IFST may be the most powerful way to enable the dedicated staff of groups like the World Food Program to be more effective.

Finally, Members of Congress should not subject the Treaty to a succession of indefinite holds because of other deadlines. Fatal malnutrition has a deadline every four seconds. And we can't afford to forget the unknown national security deadlines of terrorism. The deadly virus of anti-Americanism feeds off the resentment of millions infected by accusations that we're busting our buttons in self-satisfaction and indifferent to the plight of the poor. Putting off the Treaty till

there's nothing else to worry about guarantees that there will be more than ever to worry about.

As President Eisenhower said at the 1956 Republican National Convention, "It is madness to suppose that there could be an island of tranquility and prosperity in a sea of wretchedness and frustration." It is madness also to suppose that war alone could dissolve that frustration and the terrorism virus that breeds within it. And it's the sanest self-interest to employ the most formidable antidote to that virus by projecting ourselves as champions of the Food Security Treaty to end hunger everywhere.

As you prioritize your agendas, you might ask yourselves if even 1 in 10,000 Americans can name a single act of Congress from the three-quarters of a century which followed the creation of the Bill of Rights. Yet right after that long span, your predecessors here made slavery in the United States illegal, and the whole world knows about that. We are still grateful to them for it. We wish earlier Congresses had done it because it is embarrassing to know that our country allowed a completely unnecessary horror to exist for so long. If you put America's prestige and power behind the IFST and end hunger on Earth, that act of Congress will be remembered forever.

To begin, we urge Caucus Members to take part directly and to assign your best people to participate in the Treaty's nascent working group in the Congress. When the press and your constituents start calling to ask you about the Treaty, may they be inspired by this evidence of your effective, visionary pragmatism.

I thank you for listening to my thoughts on the subject and I look forward to hearing yours.