

CHAIRMAN RICHARD LUGAR
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
HEARING ON HUNGER AND AIDS
MAY 11, 2004
OPENING STATEMENT

During the past sixteen months, the Foreign Relations Committee, on multiple occasions, has addressed the horrific consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and global hunger. We are charged with overseeing international food assistance and the implementation of the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria Act of 2003, which was signed into law last May. This five-year, 15 billion dollar initiative is unprecedented in its scope and importance.

In February 2003, we held a hearing on global hunger issues. The hearing reminded us that in many parts of the world, food shortages are resulting in massive loss of life and threatening regional security. At that hearing, the issue of the AIDS crisis and its impact on food security was raised repeatedly. Today, we intend to focus specifically on the catastrophic connection between the AIDS pandemic and hunger.

This hearing was originally scheduled for February 4 of this year, but was canceled due to the ricin incident that closed the Senate office buildings. We are fortunate to have another opportunity to pursue this important topic. I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for their patience and their willingness to work with us on rescheduling this hearing.

We welcome three close friends who have applied their extraordinary talents to bringing hope and relief to people around the world. We will hear from James Morris, Executive Director of the World Food Program; Ambassador Randall Tobias, Global AIDS Coordinator; and Andrew Natsios, Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development. It is a personal privilege to introduce fellow Hoosiers Jim Morris and Randy Tobias. Indiana is proud of the work they are doing. I also would extend a very warm welcome to Andrew Natsios, who has been a good friend to the Foreign Relations Committee and is working closely with us on many projects.

I would note parenthetically that Secretary General Kofi Annan sent Jim Morris to lead a U.N. humanitarian assessment mission to the Darfur region of Sudan less than two weeks ago. His findings have been reported to the Security Council, and he may wish to comment, to the degree that he can, on the disturbing situation that has seized the attention of the world.

Given the infrequent opportunity to bring together all three of these well-traveled public servants, our hearing today is devoted to giving Committee members an extended opportunity to engage with them. However, we also recognize the critical contributions of Private Voluntary Organizations in addressing the twin problems of AIDS and hunger. Last week, Committee staff received an extensive briefing on this topic from members of the NGO community including CARE, World Vision, and Catholic Relief Services. These Private Voluntary Organizations are on the front-lines in confronting AIDS and hunger, and we will continue to tap their extensive expertise.

Most of us, by now, are well aware of the devastation caused by the AIDS crisis. We have heard the figures: approximately 40 million people around the world are currently living with HIV, and the epidemic killed more than 3 million people last year. Similarly, many of us know that millions of people go to bed hungry every night and that many, especially children, die of malnutrition caused by food shortages or famine.

What many people do not realize, however, is how each of these two crises exacerbate the conditions that contribute to the other. It is no coincidence that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is highest in countries where food is most scarce. Because the disease affects people in their productive years, it has decimated the agricultural sector of sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately 80 percent of the population depends upon small-scale subsistence agriculture for its livelihood and food. Since 1985, more than 7 million agricultural workers have died of AIDS in 25 African countries. This places the burden of producing food on children and the elderly. In many places, fields lay unattended with no one to work them. The AIDS crisis has left some 14 million orphans without parents to farm or otherwise provide food. In many rural households, AIDS has turned what used to be a food shortage into a food crisis.

This food crisis, in turn, is accelerating the devastation of AIDS. Without high-protein, nutrient-rich food, HIV positive individuals become weaker, do not respond to drug treatment, and are more susceptible to other illnesses, such as tuberculosis. Good nutrition is crucial for helping HIV positive individuals maintain their strength and productivity as long as possible. This means that parents can continue to care for their children, teachers can continue to teach, and farmers can continue to farm. The head of UNAIDS, Peter Piot, said that, when visited by relief workers, often the first thing that people with AIDS ask for is not care or drugs or relief from stigma – they ask for food.

Food assistance is essential if we are going to make any headway in the struggle against the virus. Today, we have a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between these two deadly crises. If we are serious about battling the AIDS epidemic, it is imperative that we fully understand the AIDS-hunger cycle and examine our response to both problems in relation to each other. According to the World Food Program, more than 24,000 people die daily from hunger and related causes. According to USAID, nearly 8,500 people die daily from AIDS, and an estimated 14,000 people are infected every day. Every 14 seconds, AIDS turns a child into an orphan. Clearly, we cannot afford to waste a single day in developing the most effective response possible.

In addition to exploring the complex dynamic between AIDS and hunger, we will discuss U.S. and multilateral efforts to address these related crises, including those of the Department of State, USAID, and the World Food Program. I am optimistic that today's discussion will enable us to understand more completely the deadly nexus between AIDS and hunger and to move toward an effective policy for their eradication.

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