

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

**“Overcoming Barriers to Humanitarian Access in
Northern Ethiopia”**

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FEATURING

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Kimberly
Flowers:

Hello and good morning, or good afternoon, depending on where you're joining us and what time zone you're in today. You are joining the Center for Strategic and International Studies conversation about what's happening in northern Ethiopia. Particularly – in particular, we're going to be talking about the access constraints that humanitarian organizations are facing there.

My name is Kimberly Flowers. I am the former director and founder of the Humanitarian Agenda program at CSIS. I was also the director of the Global Food Security Program there. In a previous life, I worked for USAID, including living and working for USAID in Ethiopia for three years. I'd like to start this conversation by first thanking the CSIS team for pulling together such an important conversation, and the great work they've done to get us here. I'd also like to thank the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs. CSIS has a partnership with them, and without that these conversation like this may not be possible.

So, first, let's frame the conversation. You know, right now all the political attention, resources, and leadership tend – at least in the public eye – to be focused on the war in Ukraine. But there is, what I would call, a forgotten war of what's happening in Ethiopia, and it's of such a greater magnitude. The World Health Organization Director General Dr. Tedros has said that "nowhere on Earth" were the health of millions of people is more under threat than in Ethiopia.

And the numbers are really staggering. They're sort of mind-boggling. It's hard to get information out, but from what we think and what we know, there are over 5 million people in the area of Tigray, or northern Ethiopia, who are in need to humanitarian support, 2 million people displaced, and over half a million people have been killed. There was a humanitarian truce earlier this year, but even during that time humanitarian access was quite constrained. And now attacks have started again and resumed.

And we want to talk today about a couple of things. One is, what does it look like right now, from what we know? What do access constraints look like? How can humanitarian organizations get the aid that's needed to the civilians that are there, that are caught in the middle of this? We're also going to be talking about the impact that this conflict has, both in the rest of Ethiopia, which is facing the worst drought they've seen in four decades, as well as the region. There's a lot of impacts that this has in terms of the region. And the two people that we have with us today, who I'm about to introduce, have vast regional experience. And so you will see them touch on what they know about Ethiopia, but also the implications of elsewhere.

I want to invite our audience, you can submit questions for our panelists. A couple ways you can do that. You can look at the CSIS webpage – or, the

event page – and there’s a button there. Or just look below and in the YouTube, like, event description there’s a link, and you can click on that as well. And we hope to be able to take some of your questions. So let me tell you who else is on this call and in this conversation.

We have Michael Dunford, who’s the regional director for the U.N. World Food Programme. Michael has been with the World Food Programme for two decades. He’s coming to us from Nairobi, which is where he lives. He’s been there for two and a half years. He’s covered a lot in the region. I mean, as the regional director he covers 10 different countries. And as most of us know, I can’t imagine our audience doesn’t know, the role of the World Food Programme and how vital it is in getting food and nutrition assistance to the most vulnerable. Michael has had experience in Tanzania and Uganda and Bangladesh. He was the World Food Programme emergency coordinator for the Rohingya crisis back in 2017. And he actually started his career as a U.N. volunteer in Ukraine.

We also have with us Abdullahi Halakhe. He is the senior advocate for East Africa for Refugees International. He has had a decade of experience as an African policy expert, working on conflict, and human rights, and refugee work, and aid reform. He’s worked for – I could spend a long time saying all the places he’s worked and what he has done, but I’ll just name a few. He’s also worked for international humanitarian organizations such as the International Rescue Committee, International Crisis Group, Amnesty International. And he’s also worked for government organizations, like the European Union, the African Union, USAID, World Bank. His expertise is, again, in the region, but both of these experts also know a lot about Ethiopia. And he’s worked on issues particularly around internally displaced persons and aid reform.

So I think – to get us started, I think I want to start with you, Michael. You know, I laid out some of the basic statistics, but help us just get a grasp on, like, what is it like right now? What’s happening? And what are some of the greatest humanitarian needs, and in particular talking about access constraints. So, Michael, thank you for joining us. Over to you.

Michael Dunford: Let me turn on my microphone. That will help. Kimberly, thanks very much, and delighted to be with you, Abdullahi, and all the colleagues online.

I think you’ve given a very good introduction. The war, the conflict in northern Ethiopia started almost two years ago. And in many ways, we’re back to square one. Despite all of the efforts of humanitarian actors, including the World Food Programme, as of today there is virtually no access and, hence, no humanitarian support going into Tigray. But in fact, this is a conflict that is much greater than Tigray alone. This is impacting over 13 million people across northern Ethiopia. Tigray is the one that’s grabbing a

lot of the headlines, and rightfully so. But it's important to recognize that this is impacting over 13 million across the north, including in Amhara and Afar.

And add to that, there's another emergency going on, and I suspect we'll come to it later in the conversation. Almost 20 million people are impacted by either the conflicts or the drought in Ethiopia today. So huge pressure on the country, and it's a reflection of what's happening actually across the region. We've never seen the food security situation as bad in Eastern African and the Horn as we are today. This time last year 51 million people in IPC three, four and five – so acutely food insecure, acutely hungry. Today that number's up to 82 million. So it's increased by over 31 million in less than 12 months.

And my great fear is that we're not at the top of those numbers. We're not at the bottom of the situation across the region. So delighted to be with you. Looking forward to the conversation. But it's very important to frame what's happening in northern Ethiopia in the context of the region, and in fact globally. We've never seen a global food crisis to the extent that we are today.

Ms. Flowers:

Well, that is – that's hard to hear, right? You feel like we've made so much progress. I've worked on food security for so long now, and there's so many gains, and it's just been – it's just heartbreaking to see really where we are.

Abdullahi, let's turn to you. And the same question really to kind of get us started. You know, as you look at what's happening right now, what is top of mind to you? What are you seeing? I know you just got back from the region yourself. You're in D.C. today. But, you know, what do you see in terms of what's happening with Ethiopia, and in particular around humanitarian access?

Abdullahi Boru Halakhe:

Yeah. I think what Mike was saying is really sobering, right? Like, that's where we are. For me, really the most important thing is, yes, the Tigray region grabs the headline, and it should rightly so. But I think it's not just the Tigrayan question. It's also the question of Ethiopia. I think over the last few years, maybe probably even decades, Ethiopia has never been this fraught, you know. It's not just Tigray. It's not just Afar. It's not just, you know, Amhara region. It's almost – if you look at all the major regions of Ethiopia, the situation is fairly grim. And so it's not just a question of Tigray. It's not just a question of Ethiopia. I think more – even more importantly, it's the question of the Horn.

I mean, this is the worst drought in 40 years. And this is – you know, we've had four failed or below average rainfall, and we are heading into the fifth. And some are projecting that we are heading – even, you know, March, April, May rains – that is usually the long rains – will be below average by – I mean,

by some estimate, by 62 percent. So it just suddenly becomes something that we have not dealt with, you know, as actors in this space. So six failed rainy season. I mean, it's the Horn of Africa, where we always say it's unprecedented, unprecedented. We are breaking record numbers in almost everything.

You know, like the numbers that Michael shared, that is just scratching the surface. If you just go below that, the MAM numbers, and some of the GAM numbers, you know, malnourished kids, I think the numbers are very, very staggering. You look at even places like Kenya, which is, you know, middle – lower-middle-income countries, there are some regions where I visited and the GAM number is around 40 percent. We're talking about Kenya. We are talking about, you know, 700,000 people in al-Shabaab-controlled areas. And these numbers should be taken with a fair degree of salt, because we do not have good, accurate data about it, that cannot – humanitarian groups cannot access.

We are talking about close to, again, the livestock census numbers are not accurate. We're talking about, you know, 10 million livestock gone. That is close to 4 billion (dollars) – very average number, if you give it 400 (dollars) each it's higher than that – 4 billion (dollars) international wealth that has been wiped out. Not just – I mean, the way you look at livestock, at least in the Horn of Africa, is for lactating mothers and children this is the most readily available source of food.

So I think you're looking at not just a humanitarian problem. It is a massive humanitarian problem, even if you, you know, suspend for a second access question. Not just in Tigray, but even in places that are controlled by al-Shabaab. And if you control for a second the war in Ukraine, where it's not only taking resources and attention, political and diplomatic, you are staring at a very, very difficult situation where the systems that we've been using, are not only inadequate, they might be a problem to this particular crisis. So we're not talking about a crisis. We are talking about crises. And the tools that we designed over the last few years, that we've used, that have failed, is very difficult.

I'll finish by just saying that, again, in terms of, you know, this crisis, 2011 was a very good period. We can go back, but it's not useful for the purpose of this conversation. 2011 – 2010-2011, we were pretty much in the same place. 2016-17, '17-'18, the response was fairly better. Why is the response now good? And when I talk about response, it's not just funding, which is very important, but I'm talking about the distance between early warnings that have been coming for some time and the early response. I'll leave it at that, and we'll dig into some of these things as we go along. Thank you.

Ms. Flowers: Thank you both so much.

Well, let's talk specifically about access, right? So, you know, as I said at the beginning, you know, there was this humanitarian truce, right? There was this ceasefire. And, you know, those that haven't been operational on the ground I think might assume when that happens that suddenly the doors open and it's unfettered access, right? And we know that's not the case, for a variety of reasons. But let's talk about, you know, during that pause was aid able to get in? How much aid was able to get in? And what is – what happened or what does it look like when suddenly fighting resumes, you know, and that everything shuts again?

Michael, I mean, was WFP able to get in during that ceasefire? What did that look like for you?

Mr. Dunford:

In fact, that was an extraordinarily positive period for WFP for all the humanitarian actors. It wasn't perfect. In fact, it was a long way from perfect. But in comparison to what was the situation before, or certainly what the situation is now, we were able over the course of those five months – from the first of April through until the conflict resumed – we were able to get upwards of 240,000 metric tons in. We were able to move in excess of about 10 – or, I'm sorry – 8,000 trucks in over that period. That was moving trucks in. That was bringing trucks out. We moved 2.5 million liters of fuel that was for our operations as WFP, but also available for the broader humanitarian.

So for that window of five months during the humanitarian truce – a truce that we had been calling for for an extended period of time – during that period, yes, significant progress was made. But it was far from perfect. The telecommunications system was still down. The ability to bring in cash to the extent required was still limited. Today much of that has evaporated. You know, we're not moving any trucks in presently. We have no fuel that has arrived since the 24th. Currently, the only distributions ongoing is food that was already in place. Fuel is being rationed.

Our staff have not been able to come out when new staff go in since the 24th of August. So many staff now have been far in excess of what was planned. Some needed to come out for medical reasons. Others simply need a rest. And we want to be able to rotate. The flights that we were using in and out on UNHAS, they're suspended currently. So all of these elements are prohibiting the ability of the international community to respond to the immediate needs. I know Abdullahi had already touched on it.

We've got huge levels of food insecurity. Eight-nine percent of the population – 5.2 million people, we estimate, have limited food capacity. Over 40 percent of them are acutely food insecure. So there's a real need for the offensive to end, the fighting to stop, and a humanitarian truce and a corridor

be reestablished, so the World Food Programme and others can upscale to the extent required.

Ms. Flowers: Abdullahi, do you agree? Is that what you see too, from your perspective? And then maybe to add to that, you know, you both have mentioned already, you know, the telecommunication issues, the fuel issues. So maybe, Abdullahi, talk about, you know, the access constraints during the truce versus now that you've been looking at, but also some of those compounding factors that makes it even more difficult, whether there's a truce or not.

Mr. Halakhe: Yeah. I think the five-month period – I mean, like, everybody who – particularly those who are at the sharp end of the operational delivery of humanitarian aid, was good. I mean, like, it could be better. And then again, you know, that five-month period ended, you know, on the 24th of August, when the new rounds of conflict came about. But my sense really is, you know, absence of unfettered, guaranteed humanitarian access. And this doesn't just mean, you know, trucks going in and coming out, but also it means fuel, you know?

If there isn't enough fuel, which was already rationed by the Ethiopian federal government, then it becomes really difficult. Food aid can reach Mekelle, but there are other places outside Mekelle that desperately need this food aid. And if it's not allowed, it becomes incredibly difficult. You have food that is ever so close to people, but it's not delivered to people who are in desperate need of it. Not because the food is not available. Not because the expertise are lacking. But because of, you know, a slow burning tactic from the Ethiopian authorities, federal authorities, to deny these people food. It's been two years now, right? I mean, like, this November it will be two years. So that makes it very difficult.

I just want to add something just a little bit to that and make another final point. When humanitarian groups cannot access a region, yes, the first order that is really problematic is people. We will not get the sort of support that they will get. But also, we're losing a tremendous amount of information that can be collected that can be used for the purpose of planning, right? Some of the data that is coming out of Ethiopia, you know, they are proxy data, you know, and particularly in the Tigray region. And so when you do not have adequate, you know, data that you can use for planning purposes and all other stuff, then it becomes very difficult, even if, you know, the humanitarian groups are given all the money that they demand, and it's hardly there. So your planning would fall short of what you need.

And then, because it's not just the access, it's the banking that is not there. I mean, they've been offline for the last two years. It's telecom. You cannot send money using mobile money transfer. So you are compounding all these

problems. And then it really becomes a very, very difficult position. And for folks who are, you know, in the delivery of humanitarian aid, you feel like you are just a sitting duck waiting for something to happen. So it wasn't perfect. It was already very strained.

But I want to finish by saying that I think most operational humanitarian groups have taken a fairly pragmatic approach in how they can negotiate access, all right? But the challenge really is for the Ethiopian federal government, this is a slimy tactic. You know, I mean, because most of the, you know, humanitarian groups that are delivering humanitarian aid do, I mean, you know, they want at least – if they can save one life, two lives, it's far more important than looking for a perfect situation.

What that does is, you know, progressively the Ethiopian government makes the constraints very difficult. In the short term, it's easier – you know, it's

reasonable, it's almost pragmatic that they are taking no – you know, let's not piss off the Ethiopian government. But in the end, like we've seen now for this five-month period, they have shut it down now. And it becomes then what was the use of not pushing the envelope? And we are left now, you know, again, scratching our – you know, your heads, not knowing what will happen next. Thank you.

Ms. Flowers:

So, Michael, you mentioned something just before; kind of, you know, WFP has tried to help push, you know, for negotiations and peace and, you know, just asserting how important it is. So what is the role – like, how – you know, there's a lot of very important talk about how U.N. organizations and even, you know, humanitarian actors, you know, are impartial and neutral and there's that sort of tension between the inherent political nature of everything related to this – (laughs) – but also the difference between, you know, a humanitarian organization staying neutral and reaching all in need. So I guess my question is, what's the role of U.N. agencies and operational NGOs in terms of diplomatic and peace negotiations? Like, was there any role that was played in order to have this last cease-fire and what role can they play to perhaps get another cease-fire or humanitarian corridor?

Mr. Dunford:

I think you rightfully say that our primary role is to be there to support the population from a humanitarian perspective and that's a role that we do and execute impartially, neutrally. But of course we're engaging with all actors to try and facilitate the access that is required? I think there are agencies, there are entities, there's the diplomatic community that is better placed to really lead on the peace negotiations and to try and advocate for the humanitarian truces, but what we are able to do is highlight what are the risks to the population if that access is not available? What are the implications and what are the needs? In many occasions, humanitarians are

the voice of the populations to highlight what needs to be done to meet their basic requirements?

And again, it's very important that this is not just a Tigray issue. This is a northern Ethiopia, and at the end of the day they're all Ethiopians, whether they come from Amhara, Tigray, or Afar. You know, this is the responsibility first and foremost of the government, but then all of the state governments as well, to meet the requirements of their populations, with the support of the international humanitarian stakeholders.

Ms. Flowers: I mean, it seems to me that it's also the responsibility of when I look at the United States or the international community, the United States is by far the largest donor. They've given over \$2 billion in aid from USAID and State Department to the Horn of Africa just in this year and yet seem to be silent. And I'm sure there are things happening behind the scenes. I understand the political sensitivities and complexities. But it just feels like it's – again, like they've been

silent and that there hasn't been enough attention or certainly not public attention. But I diverge. (Laughs.)

Mr. Dunford: I'm not sure on that. First and foremost –

Ms. Flowers: OK, great.

Mr. Dunford: – the U.S. government has been extraordinarily generous. You know, they carry the lion's share of the funding for the World Food Programme, and as you said, they've given very generously. Without the U.S. government, at this point, not only Ethiopia but the rest of the Horn would be in a dire, catastrophic state. So we're hugely appreciative. They have been active, particularly at the front end of the conflict. We know they're investing heavily in trying to come up with a diplomatic solution. We appreciate those efforts. But I think it can't be left to one single stakeholder. You know, there's a role for the African Union. There's a role for the Middle East. There's a role for any stakeholder or actor or government who can influence the parties, first and foremost to end the conflict, then to ensure that there is the humanitarian access and availability that is necessary to meet the needs of the population.

Ms. Flowers: Those are good points. Thank you. And all of that is also true.

Abdullahi, what do you think about that in terms of just the international or the diplomatic pressure and role in terms of speaking out on this or in terms of peace negotiations? You know, what do you feel in terms of the international attention? And whether it's the United States or other major

players, are they doing what they can behind the scenes or publicly to help with this conflict?

Mr. Halakhe:

Thank you so much. I think we can delineate a couple things. One is the principled humanitarian delivery versus the political process. I think in terms – I think in the Tigrayan case and also, you know, the region, the adjacent region, I think it will be very, very difficult to decouple these.

For primary reasons, number one, at least for the Ethiopian government for the last two years, this is a tactic of war. Food is a tactic of war. So I think it's not whether humanitarian groups or, you know, diplomatic/political actors want it; it is prima facie there.

Number two, for the TPTTTP and DLF, I think sometimes we forget that they have also a domestic constituency – a domestic constituency that has held the line for the last almost two years. This constituency – the only thing is for unfettered humanitarian access because of conflict and as well as, you know, natural factors, the banking and, you know, telecom and others to come online, at least for them, A, to breathe before anything else.

So once you remove that, I don't think the current leadership will even survive, because that is how bad the situation is. So the idea that they might as a principal

actor in this conflict would get that off the table will be very, very difficult. So therefore, you know, from the outset you're looking at an incredibly contested situation.

In terms of if, again, you know, international actors, particularly the U.S. and the EU are doing enough, the first few months of the conflict – you know, senior leadership, you know, have come out, made, you know, fairly, you know, reasonable demands, you know, the slew of threats, including some of the sanctions. I think after that, you know, it was – there is nothing that we can speak of. Let's be very honest at this stage. You know, things that are going behind the scenes we are not privy to, so we can't comment about it, but for the rest, including the U.N. – you know, the last time, you know, the senior leadership – I mean, the SG came and spoke about, you know, de facto blockade. I mean, that was fairly strong, even by the U.N. standards, but was very important. You know, the USG I don't think, despite all of the senior leadership, you know, visiting the region, hasn't visited the region, And so I think there is something lacking there, and I think for the Ethiopian government, they feel insulated, for now at least. Otherwise, I don't think the 24th August conflict would have, you know, come the way it came.

It's not just that now; even Eritrea feels emboldened. I mean, I think over the last 48 hours, some of the reporting that we are getting is that, you know,

there is an amassing of, you know, troops by Eritrea. And I think – so I think from where I sit, there needs to be a fairly robust response, and that can just be behind the scenes. That just can't be, you know, visit by the special envoy. That I don't think is what will move the needle. And I think also at this stage it's been two years; we've got to disabuse ourself the notion that, you know, the AU process – even if it's just in name led by Obasanjo – will yield much. Let's just be frank. Of course, it would be in the interest of so many people in whose name we are doing what we are doing; it will be almost dead on arrival.

Then I think if that process is not working, right, if that is our base, then we need to figure out what other processes that can be engaged, because this process can be allowed to go on. Let's be really honest with ourselves. You know, it's not just the conflict, it's not just the COVID, it's not just the locusts, it's not just the climate change; we are dealing with multiple streams. I don't want this to turn into an Olympic of all the miseries in the Horn, but I think that is where we are. The systems are creaking under the inadequacies of not just funding; it's, is it fit for purpose? I mean, like there are so many balls up in the air. Which one do you work on?

And, you know, I don't envy – (laughs) – you know, people like Michael and what they're trying to do, I mean, like, with limited funding, with limited political and diplomatic attention that comes to the region. And, you know, the reality is the next few weeks, I think the Somalia food assessment is being – I think that

that process is on. I think for Somalia we are practically in famine situation and that will be announced, maybe, which is, again, incredibly frustrating to say when those photos start hitting the headlines of newspapers and whatever. Is that when, you know, the response will be more robust?

Ms. Flowers: Well, both of you have touched on, you know, the implications this conflict has had, you know, in terms of the region, so let's go there a little bit deeper. You know, you brought up Somalia; we know Eritrea's engaged. You know, when you – Michael, turning back to you, I mean, you've worked in the region for a long time, and your perspective and your responsibilities as the region. So how do you see what's happening in northern Ethiopia affecting other areas? You know, is it a matter of attention and aid going elsewhere? Is it – I mean, what is it – what is your greatest concern with that?

Mr. Dunford: My greatest concern at the moment is that, you know, we're rapidly approaching a point where simply we will not meet the needs of all of the populations who require assistance, either from WFP or others. Abdullahi's touched on the situation in Somalia. Yeah, this is the one that perhaps is attracting after an extended period where it was not gaining the attention required is now suddenly doing so. But that's because 6.7 million people are

acutely food-insecure, and we are doing everything to prevent a famine, and even that may not be sufficient. WFP is scaled up from 1.5 million in April, again, with funding from the U.S. government primarily. We're now reaching over 4.5 million people so huge efforts but a hugely complicated environment in which to reach the population because of Al-Shabaab and because of the remoteness of much of the population.

In fact, I was on a call yesterday: Currently in Baidoa, which is the epicenter of the crisis, 59 percent of children under five are malnourished, and if it wasn't for the support of the humanitarian actors, be it the NGOs, the U.N., and others, you know, we would see a very dramatic deterioration and an increase in mortality. So we are doing everything we can presently and it's that combination of the ongoing conflicts married with the impacts of climate change, which we have never seen at such levels. We're still recovering from the economic shock of COVID, and now we're also seeing this dramatic increase in prices, some of it created by the dislocation caused by COVID, others by the conflict in Ukraine and elsewhere. So you put all of those factors together, that's why the number of people who are hungry every night has grown to such a level, and that's why WFP and others are struggling to generate the levels of funding.

I appreciate very much efforts by CSIS such as this one, where we are given that platform to make the case to decision makers who really need to look to see what more can be done for the Horn today, what's the moral imperative to address those needs? Interestingly, in Somalia, who produces virtually no discernable contribution to greenhouse gasses, but it is on the front line of what climate

change is actually doing and it's populations such as this, highly vulnerable to start with, who really cannot absorb any greater pressure on their households.

Ms. Flowers: Abdullahi, what more do you want to add to that, particularly talking about the regional impacts?

Mr. Halakhe: No, the regional impact is – I mean, it's the whole, right? We keep on saying "unprecedented." We keep on – it is really an inflection point. We really are there. Six failed or, you know – six failed or, you know, below the average rain – this region is practically governed by rain. And if there is not enough rain – you know, if October, November, December, we know it's below average, it's now being predicted, MAM – March, April, May – which is the second rain cycle, we're talking about by a factor of 62 percent there will be below-average rain. So we are walking with our eyes open into probably one of the most unprecedented crises in the region. It's not one country; it's a set of countries. It's not one issue; it's multiple issues.

And you know, just the final point Michael spoke about, you know, about climate change, right? There is the Green Climate Fund. Somalia hasn't received a dollar. It's not received – it's the front line of this. It hasn't received one dollar towards this. And we've been accessing the Green Climate Fund, which is – you know, runs into billions of dollars. I think it's – the last time I checked, something like almost 40 billion (dollars).

Somalia has no access at all. Somalia is probably one of the most countries that is extremely vulnerable to this particular problem. You know, so for me, really, when you are speaking about, you know, our malnutrition numbers around 59 percent, so let's just stay back.

These are numbers that we have; let's also just project if we go from the same status quo, we are entering really difficult territories for children. Let's not forget, you know, the cognitive issues that comes with not getting adequate nutrition moving forward. So we are not just looking at here and now, which is very difficult, and we all know and we all see, and we are also projecting based on what the data that we have – so we, I don't think – I think a lot of the time the debates around these issues in many spaces, both political and humanitarian, tends to, you know, sometimes focus on a particular country, set of countries. I think we will all – you know, the analytical value of stepping away, not just from a region or country but into the whole region – we haven't spoken about the Sudans which are in their own state, right? So you are suddenly being confronted by multiple crises and, you know, some of the intervention – just taking one as funding – is always inadequate. I think over the last 12 years, the Somalia humanitarian plan has not been fully funded.

You know, in 2011, some of these are structural problems now identified in 2011 are part of that problem. Are we a – either among – within the policy spaces are

the discussions about humanitarian, you know, counterterrorism carveouts being hard because we know what it did. Thankfully, unlike in 2011, at least al-Shabab is not preventing people leaving the areas that they control, but we are talking about 0.7 million people, and that is also just estimate because you can't access good – we don't have good census.

So we are talking about all these problems, and if we are not going to act now, you know, A, the conflict need to stop; B, unfettered humanitarian access. And even more importantly – I mean, I know we are – there's just so many things to deal with – accountability of denial of access of food, you know, GBV problems that we've seen, that have been documented, you know, by tenacious journalists, human rights who – you know, organizations.

We have the evidence. We cannot say “never again” just as a slogan; we have to act and act we should now. You know, we took about – you know, within these spaces, again, the window. There is no house that we – there is no house, sort of a window. A window is very small. The house is gone. We are all standing naked, and if there is no action now – and it’s not just now – into 2023, we are staring into really, really big problems – problems that we want to – it’s not like we weren’t warned. It’s not like we didn’t know these. You know, at least – you know, food assessment – you know, people are doing climate assessment. Those people have done such a good work between 2011 and now.

Some of the data that is out there, they are fairly close to the bone in terms of being accurate, but what is done with that data? Here, within the political spaces, global capitals, and humanitarian organization, people like Michael at the sharp end, they are trying to do with what they have. But the reality is we are all being – slowly being prepped walking into this problem with our eyes open and there is no solution in sight.

We will come, because it’s being driven by the political – sorry, the news cycle when, you know, photos from Reuters, CNN, and BBC start reaching out, everybody – there will be righteous indignation, you know, more aid will be freed up. You know, people will start visiting this region and, you know, all the shebang that goes with it. But the thing is, we know very well – like, for instance, if I have 10 cows and I lose five and you help me, I have something to lean on. When all my 10 cows are gone, you – it will require you a lot of money – money that is not available – to prop me up. We’re talking about 10 million cows gone. It’s like that is billions of U.S. dollars gone. That coming back will take long in – (inaudible).

I’ll stop at that. Thank you.

Ms. Flowers:

I want to use the rest of our time to pull some questions that we’re getting in from the audience, and one of the questions talks about – well, really, I’m going to add

my own to this a little bit – but in the sense of you two have painted a pretty dire picture, right? And you’re right, like, these unprecedented numbers – climate change, COVID, Ukraine war, conflicts – you know there is a very limited amount of resources, right? Like there’s only a certain amount of funding. Even if we have the data, even if we know how, there’s only so much funding.

But the question is, you know – from someone is do you consider moving resources elsewhere where there is greater needs, and as long as access continues to be denied? So essentially if access is denied, can you just say,

fine, then, we can't even focus on that area. We'll just go over here. Does that make sense for the question?

Mr. Dunford: When there are 13 million people across northern Ethiopia who are impacted, you can't ignore it.

Ms. Flowers: Yeah.

Mr. Dunford: You can't ignore it. We do need to prioritize obviously, and I think Abdullahi raises some very good points. At some point we're going to have to revisit how the humanitarian development architecture is addressed to ensure that there is sufficient funding. It's not going to happen today. It's not going to happen tomorrow. But this is something that is going to have to be revisited because of the increased demands that we're all experiencing.

And yes, conflict is one of the key drivers, and it's certainly the case in northern Ethiopia, but let's not lose track of what impact climate is having, and how climate is also potentially going to create insecurity and future conflicts. You know, at the same time that we're having the worst drought in 40 years, the fourth historical level of flooding is taking place in South Sudan. It has displaced over a million people who are now coming into conflict with the people who are hosting them. So we need to rethink how we are meeting the needs caused by climate, and what changes need to happen.

What is a drought? What is a flood? It's a water crisis. They need to be addressed differently, but ultimately it is driving so much of the food insecurity, undernutrition, and other concerns that exist today. So I think water, for example, is going to be one area that we're going to need to revisit to ensure that we have a joined-up effort to redistribute where possible.

So I don't think you can ignore simply because you don't have the access. We need to continue to invest the time, effort, and resources to ensuring that we ultimately have the access required. But it is true that we are competing with so many crises, not only in the region, but across the globe. You know, we're not talking yet about Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and many others, so it is – as I said at the outset – a global food crisis. We've never seen such humanitarian needs, and it's going to deteriorate before it starts to improve.

Ms. Flowers: Abdullahi, is there anything you want to add to that? I have a question, too, from an audience member that I think is really specific to you, but anything you want to add to that?

Mr. Halakhe: I just want to make one small point. There is a lot to be said about this, but I think amidst all this, let's not forget the refugees and the IDPs in all this, all right?

Ms. Flowers: That's what this question is about, so you're just going right into it. Thank you for that. Go ahead, sorry – I didn't mean to –

Mr. Halakhe: (Laughs.) Yeah. No, I mean, I was Turkana which is in northwest of Kenya. Already from South Sudan, I think by the end of this year would get something like 30,000 fleeing various issues – conflict, food insecurity, nutrition security into Kenya. You know, the camp already is overstretched. The facilities and support mechanisms are already overstretched.

Inside Ethiopia we are seeing now UNHCR not being able to reach some of these people who are already displaced, you know, Tigrayan – sorry, Eritrean refugees who are in Tigrayan region who have been moved elsewhere. So we've got to remember that in Somalia some of the refugees have – people from Somalia who are refugees have now started coming into Kenya. And so there is also that. I just didn't want them to be ignored. Thank you.

Mr. Dunford: If I may, I think it's an excellent point. You know, there are over 4.7 million refugees in the region; over 12 million IDPs. The big problem that HCR/WFP are facing is they're not going home. These refugees have been there often for an excess of 20 years. If you go to Dadaab, you know, 30 years that people have been relying on humanitarian assistance.

WFP in many of these locations now have reduced the rations. We are providing less than what is deemed to be the minimum requirement for a healthy diet. So this is also very much linked to the conflicts obviously but something that we need to continue to work at.

So again, we cannot forget these populations. We cannot forget these crises. In fact, if anything, we need to reinvest efforts to try and resolve them, including in North Ethiopia in the same way South Sudan, Somalia, and elsewhere.

Ms. Flowers: The question from an audience member is related but one that you didn't quite touch on, but I'm going to ask Abdullahi to start.

The question is there are many Eritrean refugees in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia, and how is the lack of aid and access affecting those refugees specifically?

Mr. Halakhe: They are probably one of the subset of, you know, people who are very much affected than these because, A, Eritrea now is an active, you know, actor in this space, you know. They ran, for various reasons, to Ethiopia which, you know, for years has provided them with comfort. But now because of the conflict, now they have moved elsewhere. So they are – and then, you know, we had reports a few weeks ago where some of them moved into Addis, and

they have now been ferried back against their will into, you know, the Amhara region, and that makes them incredibly vulnerable, you know. The last thing you want as a refugee is for you now to fear even for your safety and security away from where you ran to be threatened. So they already are vulnerable; now you are adding another layer of vulnerability. And, you know, the UNHCR is in a very tight position trying to get them, you know, to move to certain places – places that they don't deem safe.

So I think, again – you know, I mean, like it's a big, big problem. I mean, every layer if you go down you feel, you know, that within the food chain you feel people who are more vulnerable. So I think you feel like the center cannot hold and, you know, so many people who are already vulnerable are wrapped around with a different layer of vulnerability. And I think that the Eritrean refugees are probably one of those who are really feeling this – not all of them but, you know, a subset of them that are in a very difficult position. And UNHCR is trying to do what they could, but I think it's not enough.

Ms. Flowers: Michael, do you want to add to that? Or I can move on to another question.

Mr. Dunford: I was in northern Amhara about two, three weeks ago. I met Eritreans who had been displaced first from Tigray – first from Eritrea to Tigray where they'd been for an extended period of time; now having to be relocated. And in many ways they are starting over again. And, you know, the plight of the Eritreans is desperate, as is the plight of the population across that region. Anyone impacted by the conflict as it continues is feeling the brunt of it.

So, yeah, it is a bleak situation. I'm sorry to the audience because I don't have a lot of good news at the moment. Hopefully we can get a humanitarian truce, and hopefully we will be able to recommence. But, you know, that is an absolute key criteria, and anyone online who can help influence that, we encourage them to do so.

Ms. Flowers: Well, we do have a question online from USAID – someone who works on the northern Ethiopian response team. And they state USAID is tracking very closely the access constraints that aid agencies are facing and the impact that that is having on the provision of lifesaving aid in the most vulnerable.

So what do you think donors like the United States can do to bring greater attention to the situation? And what advice do you have in terms of how to ensure that their messaging is most impactful?

You know, I should say, you know, I went off earlier about, you know, the United States needing patience here. But of course, we know – I worked at USAID – there is a huge amount of sincere, passionate people working and tracking this. But what advice do you have of how to get that high up, how to

get that – you know, what is the messaging that they can do to really make a difference?

Mr. Dunford: Who would you like to kick off?

Mr. Halakhe: Michael, go first. I mean –

Mr. Dunford: (Laughs.)

Ms. Flowers: All right. You guys pick. Whichever.

Mr. Halakhe: It's not that I'm dodging, it's just that, you know, I mean, in like in all fairness there are some things that I can say that, you know, you cannot say because of, you know, so many other things. But also, you're at the sharp end of this, and you guys do the delivery, so I want to be respectful of that.

But go on then.

Mr. Dunford: Thanks a lot for that. Look, I think we all need to lean in from whichever position of whichever seat we're currently holding to try and ensure that first and foremost the conflict in northern Ethiopia, the needs across the Horn, are front and center of decision-makers. There are a variety of channels that can be leveraged. Again, CSIS, thank you very much for your efforts today to contribute to those efforts.

Again, it won't just be the U.S. government. It needs to be a collective of the international community. I think the AU has an enormous role to play, as do states in the Middle East and Europe. You know, it needs to be that collective joined up effort.

But ultimately, it comes down to the protagonist in the conflict. It needs to come from all parties to recognize that this is not going to be solved militarily. It needs to be resolved through a negotiated settlement, and from there, we, as an international humanitarian community, can step up and support to meet the population's needs.

Ms. Flowers: Abdullahi, anything else you want to add to that?

Mr. Halakhe: Yeah, I think it's – I mean, the USAID and U.S. government, I think they are doing – they could do more, but they are doing far more than others than it becomes very difficult to even criticize them.

You know, I spoke to UNICEF when I was in the region. They said over 70 percent of their funding comes from USAID – you know, the USG, all right, in various forms. I don't want to get into the weeds of it, all right?

I think, you know, when the leadership of USAID traveled to the region, brought, you know, attention, you know, at the highest level. I mean, Sam was there. Sarah was there. I think that in itself is very, very important, right?

But I think my sense is – I'm not in some of those meetings – was they go, they show, and then, they are generous – in terms of their support. Other, you know, donors will step in. That has not happened.

And I think it's very important – at least from the Europeans – to need to step up to the plate, all right? That is very, very important because it cannot just be the USG. It can't just be, you know, every time there is congressional hearing when these – I mean, at some point somebody will stop and ask, are we the only one? Why are we the only one doing this? Now, that is very important.

But I think that all our funding architecture needs to be – it's not something new – but I think flexible, multiyear funding makes a difference, all right? If we keep on relying on these, you know, annual funding cycles – like we say, we've been talking about how this is complex, complicated, multilayered, and whatever. Multiyear flexible funding is the bare minimum. It's not the gold standard that we would use, you know, in the past. It is the bare minimum, where you know, if I have a hundred million that I can move around because I know I'll get another hundred million within, you know, I have that discretion. That – if you don't have that, you'll sit tight to figure out who are the most absolute vulnerable that I have to, you know, program for.

So, I think that is also – it's not, again, just multiyear and flexible, but at the time when it comes. It cannot come when people are on their deathbed and you're trying to feed them organic food. It won't help, you know. So, it needs to come, you know, slightly earlier, and that is where flexible funding, I think, will help.

I think in terms of the attention, it would be remiss to not mention that, yes, there is not – there are not trees where money grows. We all know that. But I think if you look at the level of response – political, diplomatic, and finance – to the Ukraine crisis, it's never the same to the Horn of Africa.

Even per dollar per person it's not anywhere near. That just shows that there is a fair degree of lack of political will to respond to this until it becomes desperate. This – I want to make it very clear – is by no means saying that Ukraine humanitarian funding should be taken away. That is far from it.

Both of them can be funded, you know, not simultaneously at the same level, but can be funded, because the funding level that we have right now I don't

think for the Horn will not solve the sort of problems that we are dealing with.

I think that is – again, I think – I really would want to make this very clear because most of these countries – or all of these countries have got social safety mechanism in place with a Ministry of Labor, a ministry of this, a ministry of this. Because, ultimately, yes, people like FP, HCR, and the rest can't – there's only so much that they can do.

This, again, falls squarely on these countries. You've got a country like Kenya that is middle-income – lower-middle-income country, can – still has to rely, you know, upwards of 1 million people in need of humanitarian aid. The new president was flagging food aid.

Then, we have a serious problem, which, again, takes me to the next point, it is again, we need to begin figuring out how to transition from consistently being on the treadmill of humanitarian urgent need. Resiliency, development – these things also we need to begin thinking about it.

Thank you.

Ms. Flowers:

Thank you so much. Well, and thank you to both of you.

You know, as we wrap up, this has been, you know, a heartbreaking, but a rich conversation. We covered a lot of ground. I mean, from – you know, from the access constraints, to the regional implications, to the challenges of, you know, the lack of political attention and will.

We only have two minutes left, but I just want to turn back to each of you very briefly to see if you have any other final comments or any other final message for our audience before we step away.

Michael, any other final comments from you?

Mr. Dunford:

No. Again, thank you very much for the opportunity, and thanks to CSIS.

We need, first and foremost, the conflicts to end – whether it's in northern Ethiopia or anywhere else across the region. You know, they are creating so much of the hunger that exists today.

The situation, of course, is exacerbated by what's happening climatically, and you read the news, and it can be certainly in the Horn, but equally in Florida, in Pakistan. This is real. It's happening. We need to find out ways to address it.

We need, as we touched on earlier, identify ways to streamline the accessibility of the climate funding for humanitarian responses. Otherwise, you know, there are people who are going to go hungry. There are people who are going to die as a result. But ultimately, it's going to require the concerted effort of all stakeholders from the highest level to put the pressure on the men – the parties to the conflict that it must end, and it must end soon.

As I said at the beginning, what's happening in northern Ethiopia is not going to be resolved militarily. It needs to be done through a negotiated process. Both sides – all sides, in fact, are going to have to find ways to compromise so that the population is able to ultimately return to a way of life where they can meet their own requirements.

So, thanks very much.

Ms. Flowers: Thank you, Michael. Abdullahi, final words in one minute?

Mr. Halakhe: Thank you so much. Apologies, again, for – you know, in being very bleak, but at least – I would rather have these rather than, you know, good nothings.

Two or three points. Number one, the system is not fit for purpose – that is the humanitarian funding system. We are not dealing with one problem. We are dealing with multiple problems. So, it is even more imperative to be able to – to fix this.

Number two, climate change is not tomorrow. Climate change and its impact is today. If funding and you know, interventions are not aligned with that, then we will be having this conversation next year, the year after, and all the other times.

I mean, let's think – finally, let's think about the children. In 2011, 260,000 people died in Somalia. Half of those were children. We are getting closer to that, if not surpassing that. Let's think about not just for insecurity, but also their malnutrition insecurity.

Ms. Flowers: Thank you, both, very much, and thank you very much to our audience members and for your questions. We hope that you learned something today. We hope that you also will continue to think about this topic and try to take action and press your policymakers and others to pay attention.

Have a wonderful evening or day. Thank you so much.

Mr. Halakhe: Thank you.

Mr. Dunford: Thanks very much.

(END)