



Lessons Learned Nine Months Into the Humanitarian Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Nolan Mayhew

Close tracking of the military conflict unfolding in Ukraine has obfuscated one of Russia's critical operational plans across Ukraine. For Vladimir Putin, targeting Ukrainian agricultural production, seizing nearly twenty percent of Ukraine's grain silos¹, pausing over one-third of Ukraine's planting season, and continuing to block a large majority of as many as seventy-five million tons² of grain that could be ready for export at the port of Odesa by the completion of the fall 2022 harvest are components of his war plan. The Russian Federation's continuing threats³ on the Black Sea grain corridor negotiated by the United Nations and the government of Turkey compel interdiction and creativity by the United States' humanitarian response agencies, the United Nations, and the broader global community. Public and private sector generosity supporting the humanitarian aid response in Ukraine has been abundant, but non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the American government, and multinational agencies have experienced growing pains translating humanitarian operational plans into a flexible, effective humanitarian response plan, to address not only the acute humanitarian response to the crisis in Ukraine, but also the global south and other regions largely reliant on Ukrainian grain exports. The U.N. World Food Programme estimates that fifty million people across forty-five nations are on the brink of famine today.⁴ Global risk compels the United States to lead the globe's humanitarian response as the world's great convener of free nation-states, the world's most sophisticated global economy, and the nation-state with vital national interests invested in preventing instability in the global south, and arming and aiding the people of Ukraine against Russian aggression.

Within the United States government, the humanitarian response to the Ukraine crisis has fallen primarily to two federal agency offices: the United States Agency for International Development's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (USAID's BHA), and the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.⁵ These two agencies have been inundated by requests stemming from the most significant, large-scale humanitarian challenge driven by war since their inception. At a little over nine months into the conflict, these two agencies, particularly USAID's BHA, have faced significant staffing challenges and logistical difficulty obligating vast sums of money obligated by Congress. Close examination of the United States' response reveals that a majority of U.S. taxpayer dollars, approximately seventy percent⁶, has been obligated to the United Nations. USAID leadership, in response to congressional concerns, has conceded, "There is no question that BHA staffing, and associated CO [contracting officer] support, has not kept pace with the growth in humanitarian budgets."

Regarding the war raging today in Ukraine, the United Nations' vast resources weigh against a spirit of indifference generated by the forceful presence of Russia and China on the U.N. Security Council. Russia is also a pervasive force on the Economic and Social Council (one of fifty-four members), which has oversight of United Nations programming. Geopolitical clouding has decreased the U.N.'s reach and resources in Ukraine today; U.N. Secretary-General Guterres's diplomatic missions to Moscow have proven successful in brokering the grain export deal, but their continued posture of neutrality slows the response, particularly in Ukraine, where over eight million people are suffering acutely and are in desperate need of food, medicine, and shelter.⁷ Furthermore, hundreds of millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars appropriated for USAID have been funneled into U.N. agencies where the Russian Federation has a presence on the agency's executive committee. These agencies include: the United Nations Development Program, the World Health Organization, the World Food Program, UNICEF, U.N. Women, and the International Organization for Migration. Strategic

modifications with complementary logistical actions to increase the speed and efficiency of the response in Ukraine are necessary today to effectively allocate significant investments in humanitarian assistance for Ukraine. These modifications must first onboard new partners beyond the United Nations to shoulder increasing responsibilities for humanitarian response.

Humanitarian actions firmly within our nation's remit must move with the effectiveness and expediency of the world's greatest superpower, with the responsibility and efficiency demanded by an accountable democracy. The most significant proposal of humanitarian aid in modern U.S. history must be accompanied by a user-friendly infrastructure that can quickly and responsively deliver support. To date, the only two multinational aid organizations outside of local Ukrainian NGOs and U.N. agencies that have received USAID funding are the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS). Hundreds of volunteers from Samaritan's Purse⁸, World Central Kitchen⁹, Save our Allies¹⁰, and others are already feeding Ukrainians, treating the wounded, and evacuating the most vulnerable out of the warzone without government funding. Prioritizing financial support and seeking feedback from on-the-ground organizations with access, placement, and expertise is necessary. Beyond the NGOs operating in the country, hundreds more are ready to support the humanitarian response to this conflict, from acute aid to development assistance to war crimes investigators. Capable NGOs should not be forced to wait for a determination or technical grant application assistance until nine months following the conflict or later. To this date, USAID has not provided a public solicitation for NGOs interested in partnering with the agency to provide acute humanitarian aid.¹¹ This low-hanging fruit is perhaps a downstream effect of the larger workforce issues impacting USAID's response.

USAID is to exercise flexible hiring authorities to either onboard or reassign contracting officers tasked with negotiating agreements and executing funds for humanitarian response. USAID employment data reveals USAID has less than five full-time personnel assigned to its Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs response, an agency vested with nearly \$10 billion in newly appropriated funds. USAID recently hired two additional contractors to support its BHA operations, but by comparison, the USAID Africa bureau has fifty-four contracting officers; the Asia bureau has twenty-eight. Reassignment of personnel and flexible hiring authorities are actions within USAID's remit. The agency recognizes longstanding problems, and via its rulemaking authority, authorized the rapid onboarding of new contracting officers beyond conventional General Services Administration hiring practices.¹² While unfamiliar with these authorities, inspired USAID leadership, flush with a difficult triumvirate of its largest windfall of congressional appropriations, public interest in the accountability and expenditure of aid dollars, and a wide-ranging hunger conflict, with 282 million people facing significant hunger challenges in sub-Saharan Africa, demand exercise of these flexible authorities to the maximum extent possible.¹³

Actions within the U.S. government's remit beyond USAID and the State Department are available today. On March 10, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Congress approved \$100 million in Food for Peace grants administered by the United States Agency for International Development, and in May approved nearly \$5 billion dollars in aid marked specifically for international food aid. As of November 2022, the Biden administration has not allocated or delivered any of the \$100 million approved in the March Ukraine congressional supplemental.

One barrier to accelerating the delivery of food aid is that Cargo Preference for Food Aid requirements compel fifty percent of Title II food aid shipments (by tonnage) to be carried on U.S. flagged vessels, staffed by crews in which at least seventy-five percent of the sailors are U.S. citizens—this law went on the books in 1954 and it comes at a cost. According to a report,¹⁴ this law increased shipping costs by an average of \$52.6 million per fiscal year between 2013 and 2018 (on average). USAID stated in a fact sheet¹⁵ that eliminating the mandatory cargo preference reimbursements will reduce the deficit by an estimated \$50 million per year. Last July, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the average price to ship a forty-foot container has more than quadrupled from a year ago.¹⁶ Sustained high shipping will have a substantial impact on the transportation costs for U.S. assistance to Ukraine. Concerns are shared today in the Biden administration; U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said that the cost of shipping the food commodities overseas is often higher than the actual costs for the grain and other products themselves right now.¹⁷

Vessel availability is another significant issue. Presently, the United States only has four¹⁸ flagged bulk cargo vessels used to transport food aid, compared to 12,633 vessels on the open ocean. At current market rates, Congress's approved food aid translates to three million metric tons of food aid¹⁹, but the collective carrying capacity of these vessels is a little over 70,000 metric tons. If cargo preference isn't waived in the near term, it will take over three years to deliver this food aid, even when the global demand is so acute. Persistent inflation and supply chain disruptions have both increased the costs of shipping food assistance and limited the availability of vessels. USAID has yet to obligate any of the original \$100 million granted for food assistance to Ukraine. Immediate executive action invoking a Cargo Preference Waiver will accelerate the delivery of food aid and lower costs of transportation, which are currently expected to exceed the total cost of the executing food aid.

The civil servants overseeing the most complex, challenging humanitarian operation of the twenty-first century warrant significant commendation; the fine-tuning recommended above reflects great admiration for the quiet professionals working in U.S. and international aid organizations. Their heroism compels the humanitarian bureaucracy to remain an enduring, yet iterative organization. Without creative action, Russia will leverage a global food shortage, ongoing crimes against humanity, and continued weaponization of the global food supply for sanctions relief that will refuel the war machine in Moscow in the near term, and potentially drive an unfavorable political settlement that denies Ukraine sovereignty and emboldens the free world's enemies.

Nolan Mayhew serves as the National Security Advisor to U.S. Senator Joni Ernst.

- ¹ Tristan Bove, "'This Is Criminal Activity': Russia Is Selling Stolen Ukrainian Grain in Syrian Ports as Putin Holds World Hostage Over Food," *Fortune*, June 17, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/06/17/russia-selling-stolen-ukrainian-grain-syria/>.
- ² Keith Good, "75 Million Tonnes of Grain Could be Stuck in Ukraine by Fall, Kyiv Notes Anti-ship Weapons Could Help Secure Exports," *Farm Policy News*, June 7, 2022, <https://farmpolicynews.illinois.edu/2022/06/75-million-tonnes-of-grain-could-be-stuck-in-ukraine-by-fall-kyiv-notes-anti-ship-weapons-could-help-secure-exports/>.
- ³ Agnieszka de Sousa, "Putin's Criticism of Grain Deal Is Among Latest Food-Supply Fears," *Bloomberg*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2022-09-09/supply-chain-latest-putin-attacks-ukraine-grain-deal>.
- ⁴ Edmund Khoury, "Ukraine: Six Months of War and Humanitarian Response Amid A Global Food Crisis," UN World Food Programme, August 24, 2022, <https://www.wfp.org/stories/ukraine-six-months-war-and-humanitarian-response-amid-global-food-crisis>.
- ⁵ "Ukraine-Complex Emergency," USAID Fact Sheet, August 29, 2022, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2022-08-29_USG_Ukraine_Complex_Emergency_Fact_Sheet_27.pdf.
- ⁶ "Ukraine-Complex Emergency," USAID Fact Sheet, August 29, 2022, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2022-08-29_USG_Ukraine_Complex_Emergency_Fact_Sheet_27.pdf.
- ⁷ "Ukraine-Complex Emergency," USAID Fact Sheet, August 29, 2022, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2022-08-29_USG_Ukraine_Complex_Emergency_Fact_Sheet_27.pdf.
- ⁸ Yonat Shimron and Bob Smietana, "From Shoeboxes to War Zones: How Samaritan's Purse Became A \$1 Billion Humanitarian Aid Powerhouse," *Religion News*, September 9, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/09/09/franklin-graham-samaritans-purse-shoeboxes-humanitarian-aid-powerhouse/>.
- ⁹ "Chefs for Ukraine," World Central Kitchen, <https://wck.org/relief/activation-chefs-for-ukraine>.
- ¹⁰ "Save Our Allies: Ukraine Mission," Save Our Allies, <https://give.saveourallies.org/campaign/soa-in-ukraine/c394012>.
- ¹¹ USAID Business Forecast: Ukraine", U.S. Agency for International Development, accessed November 2022, <https://www.usaid.gov/business-forecast/search>.
- ¹² "U.S. Agency for International Development Acquisition Regulation (AIDAR): Designation of Personal Services Contractors (PSCs) as Contracting Officers and Agreement Officers," U.S. Agency for International Development, <https://casetext.com/federal-register/us-agency-for-international-development-acquisition-regulation-aidar-designation-of-personal-services-contractors-pscs-as-contracting-officers-and-agreement-officers>.
- ¹³ Clarisa Diaz, "The War in Ukraine Is Pushing Countries Short on Food to Famine," *Quartz*, June 6, 2022, <https://qz.com/2173317/the-war-in-ukraine-is-pushing-countries-short-on-food-to-famine/>.
- ¹⁴ Vincent Smith and Philip Hoxie, "The Costs of Cargo Preference for Food Aid, Country by Country," American Enterprise Institute, March 18, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/american-boondoggle/the-costs-of-cargo-preference-for-food-aid-country-by-country/>.

- ¹⁵ “Food Aid Reform: Behind the Numbers,” USAID Fact Sheet, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1869/FoodAidReform_BehindtheNumbers.pdf.
- ¹⁶ Paul Page, “Container Shipping Prices Skyrocket as Rush to Move Goods Picks Up,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/container-ship-prices-skyrocket-as-rush-to-move-goods-picks-up-11625482800>.
- ¹⁷ Meredith Lee Hill, “Biden Administration Taps Rarely Used Global Food Aid Fund Amid Growing Food Insecurity From Russia’s War in Ukraine,” *POLITICO*, April 27, 2022, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2022/04/biden-administration-taps-rarely-used-global-food-aid-fund-amid-growing-food-insecurity-from-russias-war-in-ukraine-00028303?source=email>.
- ¹⁸ “United States-Flag Privately-Owned Merchant Fleet Report,” U.S. Department of Transportation, https://www.maritime.dot.gov/sites/marad.dot.gov/files/2021-12/DS_USFlag-Fleet_2021_1014_Bundle_0.pdf.
- ¹⁹ “Food For Peace Fiscal Year 2019,” USAID Fact Sheet, <https://www.usaid.gov/ffp-2019-fact-sheet>.