

23 million reasons to speak up

Last month we responded to the latest round of [aid cuts in the Federal Budget](#) by writing to our MPs, and asking others to take action with us. This month we are writing letters to the editor.

23 million lives are at risk.

Right now, across Yemen, Nigeria, South Sudan and other east African countries, a disaster is unfolding. Up to 23 million people – about the same number of people who live in Australia – are at risk of dying from starvation because of famine.

In Somalia, while famine has been averted for now, 350,000 children are malnourished including 70,000 who are severely malnourished. 700,000 people have fled their homes to find food, more than 600 have died of cholera, yet [the worst has been avoided](#) thanks to the efforts of aid agencies.

What is a famine, exactly?

A famine is defined as a ‘widespread scarcity of food’. For a food shortage to be declared a famine by the United Nations (UN), the following criteria need to be met:

- At least 20% of households in an area face extreme food shortage, with limited ability to cope,
- The prevalence of acute malnutrition in children exceeds 30% and
- The death rate exceeds two persons per 10,000 persons per day.

Famine has been officially declared in South Sudan, with Yemen and Nigeria on the brink of being declared. When a famine is declared by the UN, there is no obligation on member nations to do anything, but the declaration serves to focus attention on the problem. Famines are caused by a complex mix of factors – crop failure can lead to a shortage of food, climate change and drought can lead to crop failure and death of livestock, overpopulation and inappropriate government policies can contribute to food shortage, as can conflict and blockades.

“The humanitarian catastrophe Australians know nothing about.”

This was the headline of a [Sydney Morning Herald article](#) published on June 11. The article stated that just one third of 1000 people polled knew about the crisis, and a further 29% knew about the famine but did not know any details. *“When people were told there were up to 23 million people at risk, fewer than a quarter of the 1000 people polled said they would be prepared to donate”*, the article said.

Why isn't it news?

Although there have been some news items on the famine, it isn't attracting the same attention or funding of famines past. Experts point to a few reasons for this:

- Famines are a “slow, creeping kind of death” without a single focal point of news coverage.
- This famine is competing against many compelling stories for news coverage.
- Lack of political leadership from those suspicious of the UN, hostile to aid, or focused on terrorism.

Where is the money?

In February, the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres [announced an effort](#) to raise US\$4.4 billion (revised up to about US\$6 billion) in aid by the end of March “to avert a catastrophe”. By the end of March, [only US\\$423 million had been raised](#) and currently [about US\\$2.2 billion](#) has been pledged. Australia has pledged \$87 million from its severely depleted aid budget since July 2016, with \$30 million of that being announced this year. According to Oxfam, Australia's fair share to Yemen alone is \$37 million.

Contact RESULTS

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Take Action Now

- Write a letter to the editor, highlighting the newspaper's lack of famine coverage or praising their coverage if they have written about it. Call for Australia to re-build the aid program so that humanitarian crises like this one can be appropriately responded to and deaths avoided.
- Build on the relationships you have built in recent months; ask other people to join you in taking this action – you could even host a Letter Writing Party!

Writing a letter to the editor

- **Who do I write to?** You can write to any newspaper, but your local publications are the most likely to publish your letter. Check your local paper's letters page or inside cover for submission details, and check out our [list of newspaper contact details](#).
- **What do I say?** If you're struggling to begin, try following the EPIC format.
 - Engage - tell your story. Who are you? What values do you hold dear?
 - Problem - what is the problem? Why do aid cuts go against your values?
 - Inform – give more information. What solutions exist? Why is this urgent?
 - Call to action - what do you want done about it? What do you yourself commit to doing about it? What questions do you have and want answers to?
- **Is there anything else?** Keep it short, simple, and to the point – less than 180 words is ideal. Never use insulting language, and always include your full name, address and phone number along with the letter. Submit your letter via email, pasting the letter into the body of the email – don't attach it. You can find more tips [here](#).
- **What else can I do?** If you have more to say, why not try [writing an opinion piece](#)? This is a longer (500-900 words) piece similar in tone to a letter, offering your opinion on an issue.

Asking someone to take action with you

- **Who do I ask?** Think about people you know - friends, family, workmates - who you think would be interested. Then expand your thinking a little further - who in your community might be interested? Church leaders? Social justice groups? The mothers' group you are part of?
- **The Four Cs of getting a commitment:**
 - **Connect** - talk to them! Share stories.
 - **Context** - what has happened? Why does it matter? What do you want them to do? How is their action powerful and needed? Why is it urgent?
 - **Commit** - ask the question. Get a yes or no answer. What is it, exactly, you are asking them to do? When will they do it? Do they need help?
 - **Catapult** - if the commitment ask was met with enthusiasm, catapult the commitment. What is something they can do to make their action extra powerful? Here are some ideas: Host a letter writing party, get a friend to write too, attend the next RESULTS meeting, introduce you to another community leader, speak about this at the next church service, include your letter in the next newsletter, post your letter on Facebook to prompt discussion with their network, etc.

Report your action at www.results.org.au/Report

Don't Forget: Join our Action Call on July 2. Meeting ID 646 924 3921.

Join at <https://zoom.us/j/6469243921> and turn video on so we can see you.

Connect to audio via your computer when prompted, or by phone by calling 02 8015 2088.