

Your Majesties,
Your Royal Highnesses,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It does not feel right that I have the privilege and honor to stand before you as UN Messenger of Peace for Hunger and Poverty when there are so many others who do so much more to address the issues that we are here to discuss today.

There are so many dedicated individuals from the World Food Program, the World Health Organization and other worthy organizations who serve people in need. I pray that I do them justice in conveying their messages and the plight of the hungry in good faith and in detail before such an eminent group as this.

This "Second International Conference on Nutrition" is the first gathering of its kind in the twenty-first century, and the problem that we are here to discuss is as old as human-kind. As the agenda shows, these issues are complex and involve a broad spectrum of problems related to nutrition.

The declaration for this conference details the human and societal devastation caused by malnutrition. I have seen that devastation many times, in many places. Ironically, it always looks the same.

Four months ago, I met a lady in Ethiopia, ten days after she and her children had fled their home in neighboring South Sudan to escape ethnic violence. They had walked 15 km without food or water, under the constant threat of attack, to seek shelter in an overflowing UN refugee camp outside Gambala.

She had no clue where her husband was, or whether he was alive.

As she talked, she squatted in the mud among hundreds of other women, with a child in her lap, waiting for a bucket of food. She told me, "I am a normal person, like you. I had a normal life." She clung to her dignity to get her through the hell she was living in.

I saw her on a good day, when she was in line for food – not really enough food, but food. What haunts me now is that she said she had to walk 10 km every morning for water. I know she risked sexual assault every night if she walked through the pitch dark to the latrines. If she didn't take that risk, she would ruin the hygiene of her tent and put her children at risk of disease.

You know what else haunts me? Every time I make this kind of visit, the people who are suffering celebrate my being there. They see me as a source of hope. They smile at me. They sing for me, they sing for me — and they are starving.

Other times, the people I meet give me hope. In Liberia earlier this year, I saw energetic and committed women overcoming hunger. They were planting crops, milling grains and working their way out from under the shadow of food deprivation. I left Liberia optimistic about that country's future, especially after meeting with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Then Ebola hit a few weeks later. Who knows what human potential has been lost to our world since then?

Sometimes hunger shows itself in its most raw form, in its moment of utter triumph. I saw that side of hunger in Malawi, and she was ruthless.

There was a family I met there.....Hunger had already taken the father, leaving the mother to struggle at home alone with her five children, until finally hunger led them on their final journey to the hospital.

When I saw them, they were not so much children, but more like skeletal beings stretched out on four metal beds around their mother, who cradled her youngest girl in her arms. None of them had the strength to speak to me. A little grip and a soft welcoming look in the infant's eyes told me she was aware and waiting for the mercy of death.

The mother showed no concern that she was dying from AIDS; she waited patiently to see her baby into the next world before her. After I moved to the next room in the ward, I heard the sound of the deepest pain that any mother would understand.

And when I came back, I saw the doctors carrying the dead child away in a black plastic bag. The mother moved to the next bed to cradle her next youngest, hoping again she would endure the pain of their passing before her time came. It was as if that little girl, that tiny emaciated little soul with the enormous expressive eyes, had never ever been there. Hunger stalked the ward and decided who she would take next.

Having seen these things I can never forget, I wholeheartedly agree with the conclusion in the declaration for this conference that malnutrition is "a major challenge to sustainable development."

That is certainly a true statement, but it doesn't go far enough. Malnutrition is not just a challenge to sustainable development, it is a threat to global security. It is a threat to all of us who eat well and have no worries about feeding our families.

There are two sides to malnutrition. On one side are the billion or so people who do not have enough to eat. On the other are the growing numbers of people who eat too much, or eat too much of the wrong kinds of food.

We live in a world of excess and want, of those who have too much and those who have too little. In that regard not much has changed from the first International Conference on Nutrition more than two decades ago. Pope John Paul the II opened that earlier conference by decrying what he called the "Paradox of Plenty," which left hundreds of millions hungry and malnourished despite the abundance of food.

The 1992 Conference came three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the Cold War created an air of optimism. The final conference declaration predicted that "reductions of international tensions will give us an opportunity as never before to redirect our resources" to the poor, deprived and vulnerable.

Today, conflicts around the world have displaced more than 51 million people, the highest number since comprehensive statistics were first recorded in 1989.

And hunger is still with us.

An estimated 805 million people suffer from hunger or undernourishment. About 160 million children under 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition; more than 50 million are wasting away from acute malnutrition.

However, we now know more than ever before about the effect of malnourishment on society and individuals.

Anemia, a byproduct of malnutrition that impairs mental development, affects about 40% percent of children in the developing world. The WHO estimates that eradicating it would increase national productivity levels by up to 20 percent. Stunting has lifelong consequences, both physical and mental.

So how do we address malnourishment and hunger? It starts with recognizing that we are not just saving millions of people, we are saving ourselves. It starts by attacking the problem of hunger as if our lives depended on it.

We have to convince the nations of the world to spend as much on food aid as they do on weapons. My husband, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed, who serves as Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates as well as Ruler of Dubai, asked the right question when he said: "How can countries around the world spend over a trillion dollars for armaments as we fight over land, ideology and religion and let 300 million children starve?"

We have to transform the words in the Rome Declaration on Nutrition into action — action that makes a real difference in the lives of people who do not have enough food. We have to focus first on the people who need the most help — those in the inner circle of hunger and poverty who are struggling to survive.

We urgently need to address malnutrition, just as we can never forget that hunger is the main root cause. We must address malnutrition just as we address obesity. But realize that they are different evils in our world....

This declaration addresses these issues, but it is not the black and white words on the page that will help the hungry and malnourished in our world. Far from it, it is only when YOU TAKE action that will allow these lost souls the rights they deserve. Unless you decide to act, unless we decide to act, we face a fate of joining the ranks of that cruel, cold, draft of wind that was so ruthless and called herself hunger. We will be her hand, and her instrument.

I can only end by saying, I tried to learn the name of that little girl in Malawi, because selfishly it would have offered me some comfort to tell her mother that I would never forget her name. But the answer that hunger gave me through that mother's lips was terrifying. She said, "I wanted to name her, but what was the point? She was just my baby, and I knew she would not live."

Thank you.