

Ruslan Articles:

Sardar's Death: An Undocumented Tragedy of Starvation

In the weeks before he died in India's West Bengal in August, 30-year-old migrant worker Sanjoy Sardar rarely ate more than one meal a day. Activists say the government is systematically failing to classify such deaths as starvation.

Sardar, who travelled near and far to find what manual labour he could, was forced to stop working altogether after being diagnosed with tuberculosis in June. That left his wife, Saraswati, putting aside most of the little food they could afford for their children. "We had been eating only one meal daily, or the equivalent of one meal split across two meals, before Sanjoy's death," Saraswati Sardar told The New Humanitarian in the village of Bhula Beda, in Jhargram district.

The government hasn't logged a single death from starvation since 2016, but Mrinalini Paul, who works with the Right to Food and Work Network (RTFWN), a local NGO, said it's clear Sardar's death should have been recorded as one, as should many others.

The Sardar family was eligible for 35 kilos of rice and grain monthly from a government-run aid programme but had been approved for just two kilos because they lacked the right ID documents, according to Paul. "They had been without even these minimal benefits for six months," she told The New Humanitarian.

Sunil Agarwala, the district magistrate of Jhargram, refuted the allegations, telling The Hindu newspaper they were "baseless", while insisting that Sardar's death "was due to illness, TB, and other reasons".

According to the World Health Organization, undernutrition is a key driver of TB, while malnutrition also makes TB therapy less effective and raises the risk of TB-related death.

The recently published Medical Certification Cause of Death (MCCD), 2020 report found that fewer than a quarter of the 81,15,882 registered deaths in India that year had known causes. Hunger activists are alarmed that a country with 1.4 billion people can only verify the causes of 22.5% of its documented fatalities. Swati Narayan, assistant professor at the School for Public Health and Human Development at O.P. Jindal Global University, told The New Humanitarian that medical workers are unlikely to catch if the cause of death is starvation given how post-mortems are typically carried out. She said it was crucial to also consider the person's socioeconomic position and the condition of their body, including the weight of their organs, visceral fat, and diseases brought on by a weaker immune system and malnutrition.

"The post-mortem reports are not an accurate reflection of hunger or starvation deaths in

the country,” Narayan said. “Oral autopsies are much better at determining if the cause of death was hunger.”

Question marks around Sardar’s death and others like it – a similar case involving three “hunger deaths” in the same family went before the high court last month in Jharkhand, which borders West Bengal to the east – come amid signs of growing food insecurity in India.

The 2022 Global Hunger Index ranks India at 107 out of 121 nations, six places lower than its previous ranking, and below the likes of Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

While India remains in the “serious” category rather than “alarming” or “very alarming”, it recorded the highest percentage (19.3%) of any country of children under five who are “wasting”, meaning they’re below average weight for their height.

Russia-Ukraine war raises concerns about world food issues

Recently, the "Global Network on Food Crisis (GNAFC)" jointly led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Food Program and the European Union released the "2022 Global Food Crisis Report". The report stated that due to multiple factors such as conflicts, extreme weather, and the COVID-19 epidemic, nearly 193 million people in 53 countries and regions will experience severe food shortages in 2021, an increase of 40 million from the previous year.

Data show that the number of hungry and undernourished people assisted by the World Food Program has increased year by year from 2019 to 2021, reaching 97.1 million, 115.5 million and 128 million respectively. This year, the number of people assisted is expected to reach 137 million.

How war causes food crises?

From the perspective of the global grain industry, the Russia-Ukraine war is undoubtedly a fierce battle between the two largest granaries on the earth.

Ukraine is the fourth largest grain exporter in the world and is known as the "European granary". Ukraine has a quarter of the earth's black land. The Ukrainian Great Plains have about 42.56 million hectares of cultivated land, supplying food for the world's 400 million people, one-tenth of which is cultivated by Chinese companies; The annual output of grains and beans exceeds 60 million tons, two-thirds of which are exported.

In 2021, Ukraine’s agricultural exports reached US\$27.7 billion, a year-on-year increase of 25%. Among them, wheat exports were 20 million tons, accounting for 9.85% of the

world, making it the fifth largest wheat exporter; barley exports were 5.8 million tons, accounting for 16.67% of the world, making it the third largest wheat exporter; corn exports were 27.5 million tons, accounting for 13.74% of the world's total, making it the fourth largest corn exporter. In addition, Ukraine is also the world's largest exporter of sunflower seed oil, with sunflower seed oil production accounting for 28.6% of the world's total and sunflower seed oil exports accounting for 50% of the world's total.

Russia is the third largest grain exporter in the world and the main grain importer for countries in the Middle East and Africa. Russia's cultivated land is mainly distributed in the Central District, the Volga River Region and the south, with a cultivated area of 126 million hectares and an annual grain output of more than 130 million tons.

In 2021, Russia's agricultural exports reached US\$37.7 billion, a year-on-year increase of 23.6%. Among them, wheat exports were 32 million tons, accounting for 15.76% of the world, making it the second largest wheat exporter; barley exports were 4.5 million tons, accounting for 12.93% of the world, making it the fourth largest wheat exporter; corn exports were 4.5 million tons, accounting for 2.25% of global exports.

The total wheat output of Russia and Ukraine is 108.16 million tons, and the total exports account for 25.6% of the world; the total barley output is 27.4 million tons, and the total exports are 29.6% of the world; the total exports of corn account for 19% of the world, and the total exports of sunflower oil 80% of the world's total.

Two major granaries caught fire, causing global food prices to rise. This war has roughly the following paths to promote food prices:

The first is the decrease in grain production in Ukraine. The war severely damaged Ukraine's infrastructure and some farmland, delayed farming time and production, and directly reduced Ukraine's grain output. According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 20% to 30% of Ukraine's winter cereals, corn and sunflower seeds may not be planted or harvested this year. The latest report from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that global wheat production will fall by 20% this year due to the current situation in Ukraine.

Second, there is fierce fighting in the east part of Ukraine and food supply is blocked. The Russian army besieged ports such as Odessa and blocked the Black Sea channel. These ports and the Black Sea channel are responsible for 90% of Ukraine's grain exports. Today, there is a large-scale backlog of wheat, soybeans, and corn at the Port of Odessa that cannot be shipped out. Ukrainian President Zelensky recently stated that due to Russia's continued blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, Ukraine may lose tens of millions of tons of food, triggering a food crisis affecting Europe, Asia and Africa.

Third, Russia and Ukraine restrict grain exports. Russia announced a temporary ban on the export of wheat, rye, barley, corn and other grains to "countries unfriendly to Russia",

and Ukraine also imposed export restrictions on buckwheat, rye, rice and oats.

The fourth is the financialization of energy and the conversion of food into energy. The rise in energy prices has pushed up the price of fertilizers, which in turn has pushed up the price of food. The war caused a spike in the price of oil and natural gas, the main raw material for fertilizers. At the same time, Russia and Belarus are the main suppliers of chemical fertilizers. The two countries' potassium fertilizer production and exports account for 40% of the world's total.

Russia and Ukraine's grain export destinations are mainly the Middle East and Africa. 90% of the wheat imports of African countries such as Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Burundi, Uganda, Somalia, and Rwanda come from Russia and Ukraine; this figure for Egypt, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Syria all exceeds 60%. Lebanon, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya are also very dependent on these two countries for wheat.

For example, Egypt has a population of more than 100 million. The main raw material for baking bread is Russian-Ukrainian wheat, of which 60%-85% is imported from Russia. After the war broke out, the price of wheat flour in Egypt increased by 20%. With less than three months of wheat reserves, Egypt is likely to fall into a food crisis. Another example is Lebanon and Sri Lanka. These two countries have fallen into economic crisis and humanitarian disaster. Lebanon imports 90% of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine, with annual food imports worth US\$800 million. However, the country does not have so much foreign exchange to import wheat, and now three-quarters of the population is trapped in poverty. Sri Lanka has defaulted on its sovereign debt and does not have enough foreign currency to import energy, food and medicine, and serious street clashes have broken out between dissatisfied demonstrators and the government.