

## KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA PLEDGED AN UNPRECEDENTED US\$ 500 MILLION TO THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME (WFP)

Last month the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia pledged an unprecedented US\$ 500 million to the World Food Programme – and not a moment too soon. While the world as a whole is more prosperous than ever before, some 850 million people are currently hungry or malnourished. People across the globe are sliding further into poverty as a result of rising food and fuel prices, a phenomenon that has been labelled the Global Food Crisis.

Several factors have converged simultaneously to create this crisis, with pressures applied from both the demand and supply side of the equation. For the past three years, the world has consumed more food than it produces. Rapid population growth, rising demand for energy and increasing effects of climate change on agriculture and livelihoods are placing enormous strain on the global availability of food. According to the World Food Program, the price of wheat, corn and other cereals has gone up by more than half over the last six months.

For the rich, this may be a mere inconvenience. But for the poor it is a catastrophe, as events on our own doorstep show. In Yemen, an additional 6 per cent of the population has dropped below the poverty line, joining the 40 per cent of Yemenis already surviving on less than US\$2 per day. Afghans are now spending an average of 75 per cent of their income on food, and an extra 2.5 million people are now hungry because of rising food prices. For Tajikistan, the global rise in food prices has compounded the shock caused by the harshest winter for 25 years, an energy crisis, and the threat of crop damage by locusts. The list goes on.

The additional strain that this has placed on the international aid community is twofold. While an increasing number of people are in need of food assistance, the cost of delivering such assistance is also considerably higher. Last month, the UN High Commission for Refugees announced that, for these reasons, it is finding it increasingly difficult to help the growing numbers of Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Across the Middle East nearly four million people – mainly in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and the occupied Palestinian territory – are dependent on food aid, and the number is growing.

Worse still, the dimensions of the problem are not limited to food, but have a far-reaching ripple effect into other areas of life. People in Egypt are reportedly cutting down on expenses for essential services such as education and health. Just last month, four people were killed in fights that broke out in bread queues across the country. In Syria, there is mounting pressure on the social welfare system because of rising food and fuel prices.

It is clear that people cannot develop, prosper or enjoy lasting peace on an empty stomach. As the price-related riots and protests around the world show, the food crisis is fast becoming a security issue. This risk is particularly high in countries emerging from violent conflict, where fragile security, political and economic progress is easily derailed.

The stakes are very high and the issue must be addressed, in its entirety, without delay. Although Saudi Arabia's generous contribution is very welcome, the costs of this crisis are likely to get still higher. Given the complexity and far-reaching impacts of the issue, the imperative for joint, coordinated action is stronger than ever.

For this reason, the United Nations has convened a Task Force, headed by the Secretary General, to address the issue. The aim is that through global coordinated action we can alleviate the

emerging challenges and address the more structural and endemic issues that have put us in this position in the first place.

The first step is to meet immediate humanitarian needs, including the secondary effects of hunger on health, school attendance, and livelihoods. Beyond this, we have to address the underlying factors that have caused the crisis, helping governments and communities increase their productivity and boost their resilience to food shocks.

There is no easy solution. But the consequences of inaction – poverty, stunted development and instability – are simply too severe to allow.