

VETOING HUMANITY

How a few powerful nations hijacked global peace and why reform is needed at the UN Security Council

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

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ABSTRACT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lead authors: Marc J. Cohen, Amy Croome and Elise Nalbandian.

Contributing Authors: Pauline Chetcuti and Mathew Truscott.

Oxfam acknowledges the assistance and significant contributions of Nesrine Aly, Martin Butcher, Lucy Cowie, Tom Fuller, Nick Galasso, Padmini Iyer, Abha Jeurkar, Brenda Mofya, Tawanda Mutasah and Ed Pomfret in its production.

Designed by Marc Rechdane.

It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International.

DOI: 10.21201/2024.000037

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Cover photo: Marcelline walks to collect water near Bangassou in the Central African Republic on 3 March 2021. 'I didn't understand the gunshots, I did not know where they were coming from. I was scared, I could hear too many gunshots, I was tormented,' says the 36-year-old mother of four, as she recalls the attack on Bangassou on 3 January 2021. Credit: Adrienne Surprenant/Oxfam (2021).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The promise of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to maintain international peace and security is broken. Conflict around the globe is rife. Dozens of conflicts have raged – some for decades – with no sign of abating, leaving an unprecedented trail of human suffering. The 23 protracted crises examined in this report have been included in the UN's Global Humanitarian Needs Overview for at least five of the last ten years.¹

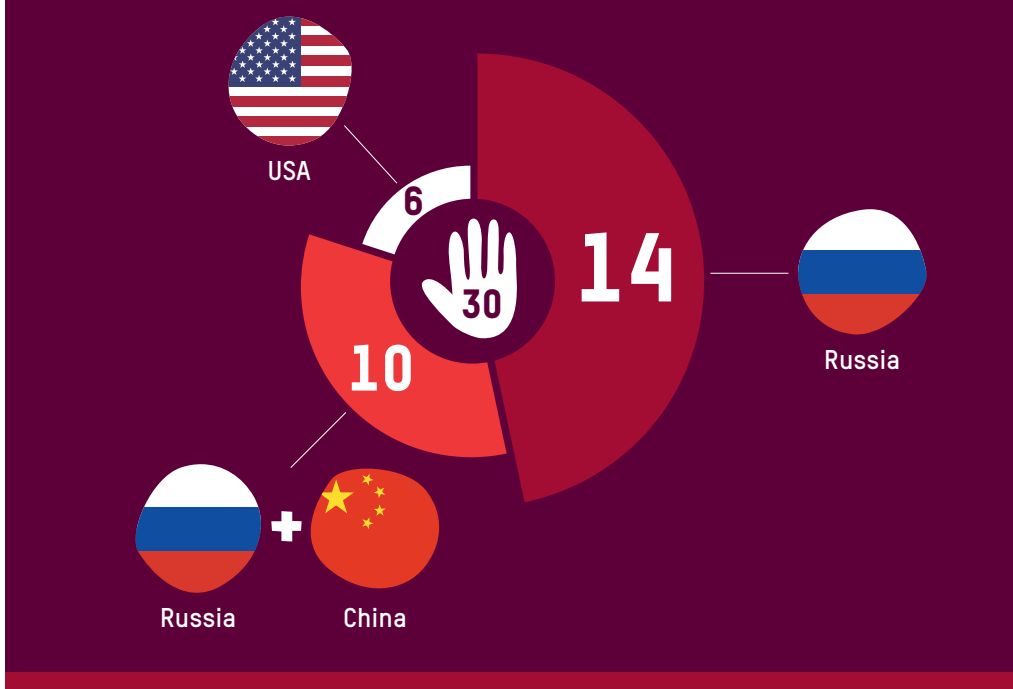
Over the last decade alone, conflict has killed 1.1 million people in those 23 crises. Millions have been forced out of their homes, and conflict has been the primary driver of hunger – pushing 135 million conflict-affected people into severe hunger.² During the same period, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has risen nearly four times, driving funding needs to nearly triple – from US\$20.3bn to a staggering US\$56.1bn – to address this escalation in human suffering.³

This is not a coincidence. A handful of powerful nations who represent only 25% of the world population, but hold its nuclear button, have too often manipulated the global peace and security system to meet their geopolitical and economic interests. Between 2014 and 2024, one or more of the five permanent UNSC member states (the P5) vetoed 30 UNSC resolutions on protracted crises, including resolutions on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Israel, Ukraine, Syria and Yemen. Russia and the USA cast 75% of the 88 UNSC vetoes since 1989, with the rest by China – neither France nor the UK have used their veto power over that period.⁴ Many of the vetoes obstructed resolutions that were similar to those that overwhelmingly passed in the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

Moreover, the P5 have deliberately cherry-picked which conflicts to address in the Council. Over the last decade, over 95% of the resolutions that the UNSC passed relate to just half of the protracted crises, leaving the other half mostly neglected.⁵

The P5 are not homogenous: some of these influential countries have expressed openness to reform where others have – and continue – to use the veto in violation of the Charter's own provisions. The gridlock within the UNSC has left the 23 crises discussed in this paper largely unresolved – namely those in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, OPT, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela and Yemen.

FIGURE 1: RUSSIA, CHINA AND THE USA ISSUED ALL THE VETOES DURING THE LAST DECADE (2014–24)



Source: UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library. (n.d.). UN Security Council Meetings and Outcomes Tables: Veto List.⁶

As a result, local, women’s rights and feminist organisations, as well as NGOs and humanitarian and UN agencies, have struggled to respond to people’s immediate needs in these protracted crises. In 2023 alone, more than 100 million people could not be reached with protection and lifesaving food, water, sanitation and health assistance.⁷

Oxfam’s *Vetoing Humanity* report illustrates how the current UNSC system is no longer fit for purpose. A handful of powerful nations have manipulated it to their own short-term political gains, resulting in a global humanitarian catastrophe that is now outpacing our ability to respond. Through three case studies – in Gaza, Syria and Ukraine – it shows how the P5 have not only failed to resolve these crises by abusing their veto and penholding powers, but have undermined the very goal of global peace and security that they first established.

The P5 provide far more military aid than humanitarian assistance.⁸ For example, in 2019, the USA provided US\$18.8bn in security assistance but just US\$6bn in humanitarian aid – and it was still the largest aid donor. While it may be argued that military aid fits into the P5 mandate of security, the imbalance between military aid and humanitarian aid is glaring. The P5 also overwhelmingly dominate the world’s legal arms trade, together accounting for 73.5% of sales.⁹ In 2021 alone, P5 arms exports totalled more than US\$90bn, or enough to cover that year’s entire humanitarian funding gap of US\$17.63bn more than five times over.¹⁰

Ahead of the Summit of the Future, Oxfam urges the UN member states to use this 'once-in-a-generation'¹¹ opportunity to take decisive and bold action to rebuild a more equal, inclusive, efficient and responsive system, which truly captures the UN Charter's ambitions and puts global peace above politics. This includes making the following changes:

- Renouncing the P5 veto and penholding monopoly and, instead, expanding membership to represent people and not military power.
- Permanent member states have a moral responsibility to uphold International Humanitarian Law and the Arms Trade Treaty,¹² and stop arms transfers and military aid that exacerbate violence and suffering, and that are potentially used in committing war crimes.
- Women and other disadvantaged groups must be at the heart of peace negotiations: this is the only way to find inclusive and sustainable solutions.
- The international community must make humanitarian funding mandatory to create a humanitarian finance system that leaves no one behind.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In the annual Global Humanitarian Needs Overviews, published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 23 countries have been listed for at least five consecutive years in the last decade, and can thus be considered to have experienced a protracted crisis (definition by Development Initiatives). UNOCHA. *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*. Accessed 22 August 2024. <https://humanitarianaction.info/>; and <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfres>.
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