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Press Release

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DELAURO ON INTERNATIONAL FOOD AID AND SECURITY

*House Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration
Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing*

As Prepared for Delivery

The hearing is called to order.

This morning we welcome Thomas Melito, Director of the General Accounting Office's International Affairs and Trade Team. Mr. Melito is here to present the report which I requested and that GAO is releasing today at this hearing on our government's current approach to international food aid and food security. Mr. Melito, thank you for being here today.

The funding of international food aid is another of the fundamental responsibilities of this subcommittee. And I am very proud of the fact that, together, Democrats and Republicans both worked to increase funding for the Food for Peace program (PL 480) by 38 percent in last year's appropriations bill. And thanks to Republican champions of food aid like Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, we also more than doubled funding for McGovern-Dole, including funding for pilot programs on fortified food that will improve nutrition for recipients of this aid.

So I am proud of what we have accomplished in this arena so far. Nonetheless, we can never rest on our laurels. Because of higher food prices and global economic uncertainty, the number of undernourished people in the world has increased by over 150 million over the past two years. And now, for the first time ever, over a billion souls on our planet go hungry or ill-fed. Every six seconds, a child in this world dies because of hunger and related causes.

If that statistic were not horrible enough, that is just the hunger side of the ledger. We also know that malnutrition causes all kinds of lingering problems for the underfed. Research shows that children's mental and physical development are stunted by inadequate nutrition, that women are more likely to suffer from conditions like obstetric fistulas, and that people's immune systems across the board are all adversely affected by malnourishment.

I believe, and I know many here agree, that the continued existence of such famine in our day and age is a moral outrage. We have the resources and the ability to confront this kind of suffering in our world. It behooves us to act when and where we can to put a stop to it.

Even if you do not share this sense of moral obligation, however, global hunger is a national security issue. We know for a fact that hunger – gnawing, unyielding – forces people into desperate acts and dangerous pacts. Famine and starvation create the conditions for militant extremism around the world, the very same extremism we fight right now in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Simply put, international food aid is not only an important aspect of our diplomacy, it is a crucial aspect of our current efforts to combat global terror. We fight hunger, and we undercut the recruiting base of those who would threaten us. As former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger wrote in the LA Times last year, “Ensuring that no child goes to school hungry is the single greatest investment we can make in building prosperous, healthy and stable societies.”

This is one reason why I am concerned about the flat funding levels in the USDA’s proposed budget for the PL 480 Title II program and the McGovern-Dole program. Now, when the world needs our help and is looking to us for moral leadership, now is not the time to forsake our commitment to funding food aid. After all, it is no hyperbole to say that helping to feed the world in this manner also helps to keep our troops safe.

Of course, we must also make sure that our food aid is distributed effectively and efficiently, and that the money we are spending on these programs is getting to the people who desperately need it. As the members of the Committee know, I am a strong advocate of creating a single, comprehensive food safety agency.

Well, based on this report, it seems we may face a similar predicament in our current approach to global food security, with ten agencies having jurisdiction over our international food commitments. Again, perhaps this is an arena where some streamlining and consolidation of our global food security apparatus would benefit everyone involved, not the least the hungry souls we are trying to help.

In any case, I look forward to hearing what the GAO report has ascertained about our current multi-faceted food security strategy, and I hope and expect that today’s testimony will help to illuminate the path ahead as we consider these issues on the subcommittee.

Thank you once again for joining us, Mr. Melito. I would now like to recognize Mr. Kingston for any opening remarks he might have.

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