

# FOOD CRISIS 'WILL KILL MILLIONS'

Russia's blockade of Ukraine's ports stopping grain shipments from reaching poor nations

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**T**HE global food crisis sparked by the war in Ukraine will kill millions by leaving the hungriest more vulnerable to infectious diseases, potentially triggering the world's next health catastrophe, the head of a major aid organisation has warned.

A Russian naval blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports had stopped grain shipments from the world's fourth-largest exporter of wheat and corn, raising the spectre of shortages and

hunger in low-income countries.

The knock-on effects of the food shortages meant that many will die not only of starvation, but from having weaker defences against infectious diseases due to bad nutrition, Peter Sands, executive director of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria said this week.

"I think we've probably begun our next health crisis. It's not a new pathogen, but it means people who are poorly nourished will be more vulnerable to the existing diseases," he said on the sidelines of a G20 health ministers' meeting here.

"I think the combined impact of infectious diseases and the food shortages and the energy crisis... we can be talking about millions of extra deaths because of this," he said.

World governments should minimise the impact of the food crisis by providing frontline healthcare to their poorest com-

munities, who would be the most vulnerable, said the former British banker who heads the US\$4 billion fund.

"That means focusing on primary healthcare so the healthcare that is delivered in the villages, in the communities.

"Hospitals are important but when you are faced with this kind of challenge, the most important thing is primary healthcare."

The battle to contain the spread of Covid-19 has taken resources away from the fight against tuberculosis, which killed 1.5 million people in 2020, according to World Health Organisation data.

"It's been a disaster for tuberculosis," said Sands.

"In 2020, you saw globally 1.5 million people fewer getting treated for tuberculosis and, tragically, that means several hundreds of thousands of people will die but also that those people will infect other people."

The health expert said solving

the food crisis was paramount in aiding the treatment of the world's second-deadliest infectious disease.

The West and Ukraine accused Russia of trying to pressure them into concessions by blocking vital grain exports to increase fears of global famine.

Moscow had countered by saying that it was Western sanctions that were to blame for shortfalls in the Middle East and Africa.

Germany will host a meeting on the crisis today, titled "Uniting for Global Food Security", with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken among those attending.

"It is the poor person pandemic and because of that, it hasn't attracted the same amount of investment in research and development," Sands said, referring to tuberculosis.

"This is a tragedy because this is a disease we know how to prevent, how to cure, we know how to get rid of." **AFP**