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Preventing famine in conflict regions

By **WILLIAM LAMBERS**
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It was President Herbert Hoover who, in 1946, said, "The inevitable aftermath of war is famine."

That spring Hoover led a U.S. effort to avert mass starvation in Europe and Asia following World War II.

We need to do the same this year in Syria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

These three nations have been struck by war and inevitable humanitarian crisis. "We must not wait until pictures of skeletal, severely underweight, children document our failure and neglect," Ertharin Cousin, director of the United Nations World Food Program, warns.

Syria's Civil War has left families desperate not only for safety, but for food and other basic supplies. Save the Children tells how one family was trapped in their basement by explosions eating just half a piece of bread each over the course of four days. Children have perished in Syria from malnutrition. Relief agencies face two major obstacles in saving Syrians from starvation. One is access to areas blocked off by the fighting.

The international community needs to demand safe passage of humanitarian supplies. Until this war is brought to an end, the tremendous suffering will continue.

There is another issue too – funding. The World Food Programme and other aid groups rely entirely on voluntary donations from the international community. Low donations forced WFP to cut rations for Syrians recently. UNICEF is also facing a huge shortage of funds for Syria.

Likewise, in the Central African Republic the lack of funding is making relief even more difficult. Since the over-

throw of the country's government by rebels there has been complete chaos.

Armed militias now roam the country. With the destruction has come a complete breakdown of food production and other services. All this in a country that was already in poverty.

WFP and other charities have struggled to move aid on dangerous roads, sometimes being forced into airlifts. However, there is such a lack of funds relief operations are facing a setback as well.

An increased peacekeeping presence and additional funds are needed to prevent mass starvation in the Central African Republic.

South Sudan erupted last year into fighting between the government and opposition forces. This country, which is actually rich in farmland, now is on the brink of famine.

Nearly a million people have been displaced, some into remote, hard-to-reach areas. The rainy season makes roads impassable. Catholic Relief Services was running the Jonglei Food Security Program, to maximize the tremendous agricultural potential that exists there. Food is the basis of all societies. The conflict has forced that program now into strictly emergency relief. Another tragedy for the newly independent nation.

These wars must be ended. But peace cannot be found without humanitarian aid. We need to continue to supply this until peace and reconstruction can occur.

If aid groups can receive enough funding we can save war victims in all these countries from starvation. As Hoover said in 1946, "And we cannot fail."

William Lambers is the author of "Ending World Hunger" and "The Road to Peace."

JOBLESS BENEFITS AGENCY PENNY-WISE, POUND-FOOLISH

Officials nixed computer upgrade that could have saved \$516 million.



ADAM B. SUMMERS
STAFF COLUMNIST

In yet another stunning example of government waste and inefficiency, a new California Bureau of State Audits report has found that the Employment Development Department failed to recover an estimated \$516 million in unemployment benefit overpayments over a three-and-a-half year period because it did not want to spend \$323,000 on computer upgrades. Sadly, this type of mismanagement seems to be par for the course at the EDD.

The federal Treasury Offset Program helps states recover improper payments to beneficiaries due to fraud or overpayment errors by having the federal government deduct the amount of the overpayments from federal tax refunds or other federal payments. These funds are then diverted to state coffers. The EDD already utilizes the Offset Program to collect outstanding personal income taxes and state disability insurance contributions that employers withheld from employee paychecks but did not submit to the EDD.

In 2011, the Offset Program was expanded to allow for the collection of unemployment benefit overpayments. The problem is that the state maintains its unemployment benefits debt information on an ancient computer system, so it cannot transmit the data in a format compatible with federal computer systems.

According to the State Auditor's report, in May of 2012 EDD collections staff conservatively estimated that participating in the program would allow the state to collect more than \$100 million during the first year. The following month, the department's IT staff estimated that it would cost about \$322,800 to upgrade the computer system to allow California to participate in the program.

Yet, despite the fact that California's unemployment insurance fund has been insolvent since January 2009, and that the state has been forced to borrow \$10 billion from the federal government to run the unemployment program since then, EDD's upper management decided the investment was not worth it.

It was only after a tip from a whistle-blower led to the State Auditor's investigation that the depart-

ment determined that maybe it should utilize the program after all.

This is but the latest in a string of scandals plaguing the troubled agency. Last September, the rollout of a glitch-ridden \$100 million computer system overhaul delayed unemployment payments to tens of thousands of Californians, and some benefits recipients and applicants have been unable to reach an EDD employee on the phone or by e-mail for weeks or months at a time.

A December 2013 CalWatchdog.com report described EDD employees that napped at their desks, watched television shows and movies on their iPads, made personal phone calls for hours, turned off their phones so they would not have to answer them, shuffled papers all day to kill time and spent entire working days planning and decorating for holiday parties while accumulating overtime. Meanwhile, supervisors socialized with co-workers or looked the other way and productive workers were deliberately thwarted.

Several unnamed employees cited in the Cal-Watchdog report speculated that EDD upper management actively invited the unpaid claims crisis in a manipulative attempt to make a case for more funding to the Legislature and the governor.

It is cases like this that illustrate the different incentives faced by decision-makers in the public and private sectors. In the private sector, this type of waste and inefficiency would be the death knell for a business. Though not without

their own bureaucratic issues, businesses must quickly root out inefficiencies or fail. Employees must be productive, or lose their jobs to others who will be. Government agencies are immune to these pressures, however, and failure is regularly rewarded with increased funding.

The EDD scandals are the kinds of things that drives taxpayers mad – and rightfully so. Politicians often talk about making government more efficient and eliminating waste, fraud and abuse. Well, here is their chance. It should not take a state investigation to force agencies to stop wasting taxpayers' money, but if that is what it takes then the EDD is evidence that such efforts need to be broadened to audit as many state agencies as possible.

Adam B. Summers is a columnist and editorial writer for the Register.



MCT ILLUSTRATION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Church plays immigration politics at border

Bishops from the Roman Catholic Church held Mass at the border this week ["Bishops celebrate Mass along Mexican border," Nation, April 2]. They sought to bring the plight of illegal immigrants to the public. They blamed both parties in Washington and, basically, the American people for immigrant problems.

It seems that they are targeting the wrong government. Why are they, and Hispanic groups like La Raza and MEChA, not taking their complaints about immigrants' plight to the Mexican government? It is not the responsibility of Americans or our government to take in the world's poor and uneducated. We have enough poor of our own to worry about.

Mexico is not the poor, underprivileged country it pretends to be but finds it easier and more profitable to let another country deal with its poor

and uneducated by crying "poverty."

We should be more concerned about our own rising numbers of poor and hungry than worrying about illegal immigrants whose own country should be doing more for them.

The plight of illegal immigrants is regrettable, but their country must take the blame for doing nothing but encouraging them to leave their own country rather than helping them.

Ed Bjork
Fountain Valley

NEW FORUM FOR ATHLETE TAXES

So, the Chicago regional director of the National Labor Relations Board, Peter Sung Ohr, and columnist Erwin Chemerinsky believe that athletes in major colleges are employees of that college ["College athletes are employees: Pay them," Opinion, April 2].

Let's see where the running back runs. Employees should be paying income and payroll taxes on their income, which includes any money paid, the value of any scholarships, housing or food plus other income received. The college should also

pay athlete shares of payroll taxes, including worker's compensation, file W2 forms and collect taxes from athletes.

Chemerinsky got it right when he said that calling them student athletes is a fiction. The quickest solution would be for colleges to eliminate intercollegiate sports and concentrate on what they were formed for. That is not likely to happen because too much money is involved. So maybe they are right, and the government should collect taxes.

Lloyd Schwengel
Brea

AN UNSUCCESSFUL ENROLLMENT

I am having trouble following the facts as asserted by the Obama administration and the media. The mission of Obamacare is said to be providing affordable health care to some 43 million uninsured Americans.

Yet this week a grand nationwide celebration was punctuated by a Rose Garden presidential proclamation because about 7 million Americans had complied with a federal deadline, a law that obliges all who are not properly insured to register, enroll and sign up for Obamacare.

Even if each of those 7 million enrollments had been among the 43 million who were, until now, uninsured that means that the mission stands at less than one-sixth accomplished.

If we comply with the law, the deadline for filing our state and federal income taxes is quickly approaching. If only one of six wage-earners actually files a return, do we hold a victory rally? Do we even now smell the roses?

D.Q. Rosenow
Fullerton

LEAVE CLIMATE STUDIES TO EXPERTS

Columnist Mark Landsbaum is an extremely talented journalist and investigative reporter, but he is not a scientist ["Does youth buy global warming threat?" Opinion, March 29] nor are most "anti-warmists," except the few that are already associated with fossil fuels, energy distribution or extreme conservative doctrine.

Not that Al Gore is a qualified scientist, either, but he relied on scientists to interpret the scientific data and he did not attempt to form a hypothesis by himself.

Neither a single snowstorm nor a huge wildfire indicate the efficacy of any one theory. All

the data has to be collected, verified and then analyzed as a complete set of information.

Roger Iles
Rancho Santa Margarita

AS THE EARTH MOVES

Regarding the front-page article, "Scientists say the potential for mass [earthquake] destruction is high but can't pinpoint a time" ["Quake science a mystery along Puente Hills fault," April 1]. Perhaps these scientists should use some computer models. They seem to work really well for global warming.

Gary McCloud
Trabuco Canyon

THE O.C. EXPANDS

Congratulations to Rebecca Morse of Pasadena and Cecelia Wycoff of Sun City for being the winner and first runner-up of the Ms. Senior Orange County pageant ["Pasadena woman is Ms. Senior Orange County," Local, April 1]. I just didn't realize that Pasadena and Sun City are in Orange County now.

Yi H. Doo
Irvine

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