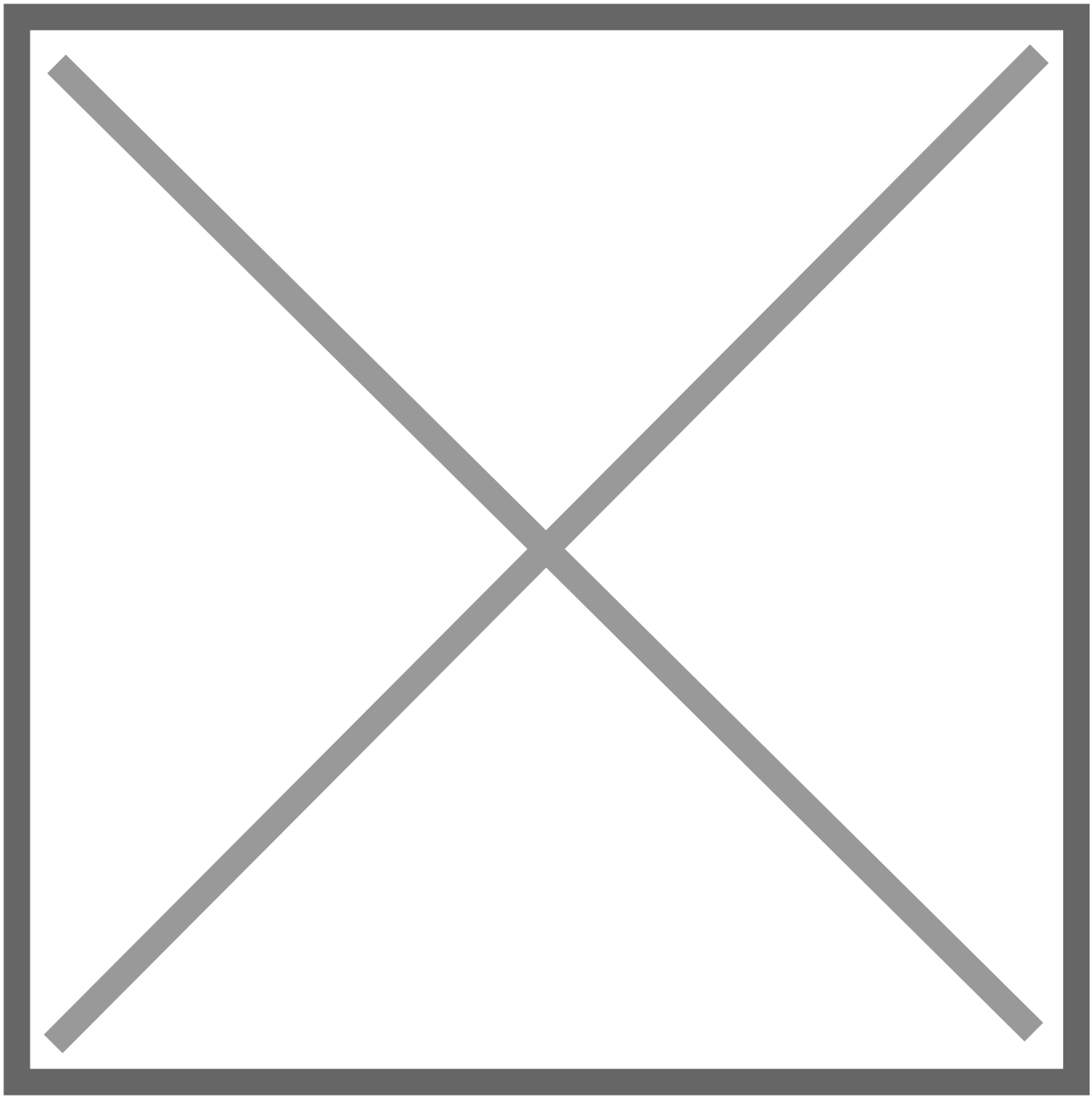
News
Vatican



Pope Francis meets with David Beasley, executive director of the World Food Program, Jan. 28, 2021 at the Vatican. On the same day, the WFP issued a joint press release with UNICEF warning that millions of children have missed meals since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis met with David M. Beasley, the executive director of the U.N. World Food Program, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020.

Headquartered in Rome, the WFP is the world's largest humanitarian organization addressing hunger and promoting food security.

The private papal audience was held in the apostolic library at the Vatican Jan. 28, and the Vatican provided photographs, but no other details.

The WFP, however, released a statement saying it was a 40-minute meeting during which Beasley "voiced specific fears about famine looming in several countries at the same time as COVID-19 is ravaging communities around the globe."

The statement, released Jan. 28, said, "Beasley also briefed Pope Francis on his appeal to billionaires who have become wealthier during the COVID-19 pandemic to step up and fund efforts to support the hungry and poor."

The WFP estimates that some 270 million people will face severe hunger this year, fueled by COVID-19, conflict, climate shocks and other factors, the statement said.

The meeting came the day after Beasely participated in the World Economic Forum's annual meeting, which was held both online and in-person in Davos, Switzerland.

The gathering Jan. 26-29 included key government and business leaders from around the world and focused on the theme, "The Great Reset," as part of a call for leaders to commit to ensuring the global economic and social systems could be more fair, sustainable and resilient.

Speaking to the gathering virtually Jan. 27, Beasley said the COVID-19 pandemic showed how important it was to bolster vulnerable supply chains to poor countries that have been unable to get food to their people, according to the Associated Press.

"If you think you've had trouble getting toilet paper in New York because of supply chain disruption, what do you think's happening in Chad and Niger and Mali and places like that?" he said in his talk.

The global food supply system does work, but the pandemic has worsened weaknesses, he said. Also 10% of the world's population experiences extreme poverty, and they need to be proactively reached out to by suppliers.

"With 270 million people on the brink of starvation, if we don't receive the support and the funds that we need, you will have mass famine, starvation, you'll have destabilization of nations and you'll have mass migration. And the cost of that is a thousand times more," he said, according to the AP.

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The same day Beasley met with the pope, the WFP issued a joint press release with UNICEF warning that millions of children have missed out on over 39 billion meals at school since the start of the pandemic.

They called for greater support for governments so they could reopen schools safely and get school feeding programs going again to avert a "nutrition crisis."

School meals, the joint press release said, are "often the one nutritious daily meal that children get" and they "must be prioritized in school reopening plans" that include infection prevention measures like clean water and soap in every school.

School feeding programs were also an added incentive for kids, especially girls, to attend school, and the latest estimates show that 24 million schoolchildren are at risk of dropping out of school due to the pandemic, it added.

The WFP, it said, has been helping governments fill the gap with delivered take-home rations, cash transfers or food vouchers. In the first nine months of 2020, more than 13 million schoolchildren received WFP school-based support as compared to 17.3 million the previous year, it said.

Beasley also recently warned the U.N. Security Council of imminent famine in Yemen.

Addressing the council in mid-January, he said the WFP needed "about $860 million just to avert famine. And that's for six months."

"We're struggling now to feed 13 million people" and without the money, those rations will be cut, pushing 80% of the population into a deeper nutritional crisis.

"How are they going to get food? How are they going to get fuel? How are they going to get medicine? It is going to be a catastrophe ... we're going to have a catastrophe on our hands."