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Pope Leo XIV speaks during a meeting with the employees of the United Nations World Food Program in Rome June 22, 2026. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Pope Leo XIV said Monday, June 22, that wars are being sustained more easily than people are fed, urging governments to strengthen resources to combat hunger after a severe funding shortfall by the United States and other countries.

Addressing the governing body of the U.N. World Food Program in Rome, Leo pressed governments to cut red tape and tear down obstacles that prevent assistance from reaching those in need.

Echoing a warning first voiced by late Pope Francis during a World Food Program visit a decade ago, Leo criticized political and administrative barriers that slow humanitarian aid while military spending continues unhindered.

"Whereas forms of aid and development projects are obstructed by involved and incomprehensible political decisions, skewed ideological visions and impenetrable customs barriers, weaponry is not," he said. "In effect, conflicts are 'fed' more readily than people are nourished."

The appeal comes as funding for food assistance has dropped sharply — by about 59% since 2022 — even as needs have surged, according to a recent World Food Program report.

There was some positive news on funding last week, with the United States pledging $800 million to the World Food Program. The agency said the contribution will help more than 38 million people in at least 37 countries at a time of unprecedented global need.

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Still, the World Food Program's more than $10 billion appeal for 2026 remains severely underfunded.

For years, the U.S. Agency for International Development was the backbone of humanitarian aid worldwide. But last year, the Trump administration abolished the agency, cutting $60 billion in overall assistance. Under a reset in December, the U.S. has restored funding to the World Food Program and announced $218 million in assistance to UNICEF.

Leo warned that today's crises — from conflict to climate and economic strain — have become "persistent realities," arguing that the global system is no longer simply failing but reproducing the conditions behind hunger.

He described a fractured international order marked by mistrust, with countries prioritizing national interests over cooperation even as hunger fuels instability, migration and conflict.

Warning that the stakes go beyond humanitarian relief, the pope urged leaders to place human dignity at the center of decision-making.

"Every human person possesses an inherent and inalienable dignity that remains intact regardless of circumstance, condition or social status," he said.