World Food Program wins Nobel Peace Prize for hunger fight

October 10 2020, by Dalatou Mamane, Frank Jordans and Vanessa Gera

In this Sept. 9, 2015 file photo, a child carries a parcel from the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) in Mwenezi, Zimbabwe. The WFP has won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. The announcement was made Friday Oct. 9, 2020 in Oslo by Berit Reiss-Andersen, the chair of the Nobel Committee. (AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, File)

The World Food Program won the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday for fighting hunger and seeking to end its use as "a weapon of war and conflict" at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has driven millions more people to the brink of starvation.

Announcing the prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee said it wished "to turn the eyes of the world towards the millions of people who suffer from or face the threat of hunger."

The committee also said it hoped that bestowing the prize on the U.N. agency would highlight the need to strengthen global solidarity and cooperation in an era of go-it-alone nationalism.

"We are sending a signal to every nation who raises objections to international cooperation," committee chair Berit Reiss-Andersen said. "We are sending a signal to this type of nationalism where the responsibility for global affairs is not being faced."

The Rome-based agency was established in 1961 at the behest of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and has brought aid to multiple crises, including Ethiopia's famine of 1984, the Asian tsunami of 2004 and the Haiti earthquake of 2010.

It continues to bring assistance to the world's most dangerous and precarious places, from air-dropping food in South Sudan and Syria to creating an emergency delivery service that kept aid flowing even as pandemic restrictions grounded commercial flights.

In this image taken from WFP video, David Beasley, Executive director of the World Food Program (WFP), center, celebrates with members of WFP staff in Niamey, Niger, Friday Oct. 9, 2020, after being awarded the 2020 Nobel Peace prize. The World Food Program has won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. The announcement was made Friday in Oslo by Berit Reiss-Andersen, the chair of the Nobel Committee. (WFP via AP)

In bestowing what is arguably the world's most prestigious prize on the World Food Program, the Norwegian committee is honoring an organization headed by David Beasley, a Republican former South Carolina governor nominated for the job by President Donald Trump.

Beasley said the prize rightly goes to his entire team.

"I know I'm not deserving of an award like this—but all the men and women around the world in the World Food Program and our partners who put their lives on the line every day to help those in need, that is inspiring and encouraging," he told The Associated Press by phone from Niger.

WFP staffers in Niger greeted Beasley with cheers and applause as he emerged to address a crowd after the announcement. "I didn't win it, you won it," he told them.

The award comes as Trump has pulled the United States out of several U.N. bodies, including the Human Rights Council and UNESCO, the cultural agency. He has also repeatedly criticized the U.N.'s World Health Organization over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic, and his administration has said the United States will leave it in July.

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In light of that pullback, the choice of the World Food Program was particularly notable because the U.S. remains by far its biggest donor, the agency has been run by an American for nearly 40 years, and Beasley has been a rare recent example of U.S.-led internationalism.

The Nobel Committee said the problem of hunger has again become more acute in recent years, not least because the pandemic has added to the hardship already faced by millions.

WFP estimates that 690 million people worldwide suffer some form of hunger today.

"Where there is conflict, there is hunger. And where there is hunger, there is often conflict," Beasley said in a statement on the agency's website. "Today is a reminder that food security, peace and stability go together."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he was delighted the award went to "the world's first responder on the front lines of food insecurity." It was the ninth award for the U.N. or one of its agencies.

In this Wednesday, May 19, 2010 file photo, Somali porters offload sacks of a maize shipment from the World Food Program (WFP), intended for distribution to the many thousands of needy internally displaced persons in the country, into a warehouse in the seaport of Mogadishu, Somalia. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Mohamed Sheikh Nor, File)

"In a world of plenty, it is unconscionable that hundreds of millions go to bed each night hungry," Guterres said. "Millions more are now on the precipice of famine due to the COVID-19 pandemic."

The Nobel Committee called on governments to ensure that WFP and

other aid organizations receive the financial support needed to feed millions in countries such as Yemen, Congo, Nigeria and South Sudan.

When the award was announced, Beasley was in Niger, following a visit to neighboring Burkina Faso—two countries in the Sahel region of Africa that he said is "under attack by extremists and climate extremes" and going through "a devastating" time.

A logistics juggernaut, WFP this year created a global emergency delivery service for humanitarian aid. Officials said the unprecedented effort involved nearly 130 countries and was key in ensuring that aid for the pandemic kept flowing in addition to other assistance, like the drugs and vaccines needed to combat other diseases.

World Food Program (WFP) Executive Director David Beasley speaks to the media about the organization's Nobel Peace Prize win, at the airport in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, late Friday, Oct. 9, 2020. The World Food Program won the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday for fighting hunger and seeking to end its use as "a weapon of war and conflict" at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has driven millions more people to the brink of starvation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

As recently as this week, a WFP humanitarian convoy was attacked in South Sudan, drawing condemnation from the U.S. State Department.

There was no shortage of causes or candidates on this year's Nobel list, with 211 individuals and 107 organizations nominated.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee maintains absolute secrecy about whom it favors before the announcement, but WFP had been on the short list of Dan Smith, the director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

"The global problem of hunger is increasing and so is the global problem of violent conflict," Smith said. "The World Food Program works at the intersection of those two problems (and) it's going to face an increasing workload in the coming years."

Some, however, noted that the World Food Program's top donors are also major food exporters and often involved in the sale of arms to conflict zones where the agency works, from Afghanistan to Yemen.

In this Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020 file photo, a woman holds a voucher to receive food aid, in Mudzi, Zimbabwe. The WFP has won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. The announcement was made Friday Oct. 9, 2020 in Oslo by Berit Reiss-Andersen, the chair of the Nobel Committee. (AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, File)

In this Thursday, June 26, 2014 file photo, workers offload sacks of cereals from the World Food Program (WFP) from a truck in Minkaman, South Sudan. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Matthew Abbott, File)

In this Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017 file photo, a World Food Program (WFP) plane drops food aid over the town of Jiech, Ayod County, in South Sudan. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick, File)

Berit Reiss-Andersen, chair of the Nobel Committee announces the winner of the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Friday Oct. 9, 2020. The World Food Program has won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (Stian Lysberg Solum/NTB via AP)

In this Thursday, Jan. 15, 2009 file photo, Andre Mislene, 15-months, hangs from a scale at the World Food Program (WFP) and Save the Children Clinic for emergency food and medical care in Baie d'Orange, Haiti. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos, File)

In this Sept. 21, 2018 file photo, men deliver U.N. World Food Program (WFP) aid in Aslam, Hajjah, Yemen. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Hammadi Issa, File)

In this photo provided by the United Nations, David Beasley, Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) briefs the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, July 18, 2019, in New York. The United Nations' World Food Program has won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (Loey Felipe/UN Photo via AP)

In this Dec. 7, 2014 file photo, people carry food aid from the United Nations World Food Program agency, dropped by a British Navy helicopter after it made a food drop on Sherbro Island, Sierra Leone. On Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 the WFP won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Michael Duff, file)

In this Aug. 8, 2012 file photo, internally displaced Congolese men and women wait for the World Food Program (WFP) to distribute energy biscuits in Kibati, north of Goma, in eastern Congo. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay, File)

In this Wednesday, May 2, 2018 file photo, a woman scoops fallen sorghum grain off the ground after an aerial food drop by the World Food Program (WFP) in the town of Kandak, South Sudan. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick, File)

In this Friday, June 19, 2015 file photo, children sit on bags of rice from the World Food Program (WFP) at a school that serves as a shelter for internally displaced people in Baghdad's eastern district of Jamila, Iraq. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Karim Kadim, File)

Members of the media stand outside the headquarters of the United Nations World Food Program (WFP), in Rome, Friday, Oct. 9, 2020. The WFP has won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. The announcement was made Friday in Oslo by Berit Reiss-Andersen, the chair of the Nobel Committee. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

World Food Program (WFP) Executive Director David Beasley speaks to the media about the organization's Nobel Peace Prize win, at the airport in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, late Friday, Oct. 9, 2020. The World Food Program won the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday for fighting hunger and seeking to end its use as "a weapon of war and conflict" at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has driven millions more people to the brink of starvation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

In this Feb. 20, 2018 file photo, a Sudanese refugee man sits on his bike after collecting food from a World Food Program (WFP) food distribution in Yida, South Sudan. The World Food Program on Friday, Oct. 9, 2020 won the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity around the globe. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick, File)

World Food Program (WFP) Executive Director David Beasley speaks to the media about the organization's Nobel Peace Prize win, at the airport in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, late Friday, Oct. 9, 2020. The World Food Program won the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday for fighting hunger and seeking to end its use as "a weapon of war and conflict" at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has driven millions more people to the brink of starvation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

"This Nobel Prize is important to celebrate multilateral cooperation, to show solidarity between nations," said Frederic Mousseau, policy director at The Oakland Institute, a progressive think tank based in California. "But we should not ignore the hypocrisy of the richest nations engaged in and profiteering from the wars where they finance WFP interventions."

The award comes with a gold medal and a 10-milion krona ($1.1 million) cash prize that is dwarfed by the funding that WFP requires for its work. So far in 2020, the organization has received almost $6.4 billion in cash or goods, with over $2.7 billion coming from the U.S.

On Monday, the Nobel Committee awarded the prize for physiology and medicine for discovering the liver-ravaging hepatitis C virus. Tuesday's prize for physics honored breakthroughs in understanding the mysteries of cosmic black holes, and the chemistry prize on Wednesday went to scientists behind a powerful gene-editing tool. The literature prize was awarded to American poet Louise Glück on Thursday for her "candid and uncompromising" work.

The Nobel Memorial Prize for economics, which was only established in 1968, will be awarded Monday.