Throughout history, people have suffered devastating periods of hunger, called famines. These are caused by drought, war or bad government decisions.

In March, South Sudan was declared the site of the world's first famine in six years. It is affecting about 100,000 people. Here is an exploration of this term.

**What is a famine?**

"Famine is not a word that we use lightly," said Erminio Sacco. He is a food expert who works for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Since 2007 the term has been used according to a scientific system. It is agreed upon by different groups around the world. The system is called the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) scale.

The IPC scale says that three things must happen for something to be called a famine. First, at least 20 percent of the people in an area must have very limited access to food. Second, at least 30 percent of people must not have enough nutrition and have had serious weight loss. Third, at least 2 out of every 10,000 people must be dying each day.

This defines famine clearly. It prevents the term from being misused by political leaders for the wrong reasons.

**Where have famines occurred?**

Over the past 100 years, famines have hit China, the Soviet Union, Iran and Cambodia. They are often the result of human actions.

Europe suffered several famines during the 1300s in the Middle Ages. Europe's most recent famines were during World War I and II, when parts of Germany, Poland and the Netherlands were left starving. They were cut off from food by their enemy's military.

In Africa, there have been several famines over the last 50 years. There were famines in Nigeria in the 1970s and in Ethiopia from 1983 to 1985. This focused a new kind of attention on the suffering, as many famous people raised money to bring food and medicine to those areas.

The last famine in the world was in Somalia in 2011. It killed about 260,000 people.

**Why are there still famines today?**

South Sudan is experiencing famine. The United Nations has warned that Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen are at risk as well. This could affect more than 20 million people.

A map showing where there is famine in the African country of Sudan. Other areas highlighted show their level of food shortages. Courtesy of AFP and AlJazeera. [Click to enlarge.]

Sacco said that the one thing these places all share are a long conflict, like a war. These conflicts affect access to food, farming and trade. They also prevent these areas from getting help from other countries.

Of the four famine warnings, only the one in Somalia is caused by drought. The other three are because of conflicts.

**What is life like under famine?**

In South Sudan, many people have had to pack up and move over the last few years, sometimes many times. They have lost their homes, crops and livestock. Many have to hide in swamps.

Sacco said that they have no other option. They must spend days looking for wild foods such as water lily roots, fruit or fish.

They also spend days walking in search of food aid. They pass through areas controlled by dangerous groups with guns.

"They are extremely weak, hungry and drink unsafe water from ponds and rivers," Sacco said.

Cholera is an intestinal infection that is the result of drinking contaminated water. It is a serious danger.

**What does it mean to die from hunger?**

In 1997, the British Medical Journal magazine published a study on hunger. It said that starvation changes the body.

These changes affect the brain and other major organs. Once this has happened, a person can't eat normal food. They have to eat food designed for someone who does not have enough nutrition. They may have to be fed through a feeding tube or through their veins.

Not eating enough food over several weeks leads to organ failure. Eventually, the person dies.

**What are the long-term impacts?**

Parts of Africa go through regular cycles of hunger. They create long-term problems. This affects countries in Northern Africa, including Sudan, Niger, Chad, Mali, Somalia and Ethiopia.

Sacco said that the damage this hunger causes can affect generations of people. The children do not develop fully. This may result in fewer people who can work and students may have learning delays. Hunger leads to stunted growth and affects the brain's growth. It can also lead to poor health throughout a person's life.