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IT IS the new face of hunger. A perfect storm of food scarcity, global warming, rocketing oil prices and the world population explosion is plunging humanity into the biggest crisis of the 21st century by pushing up food prices and spreading hunger and poverty from rural areas into cities.

Millions more of the world's most vulnerable people are facing starvation as food shortages loom and crop prices spiral ever upwards.

And for the first time in history, say experts, the impact is spreading from the developing to the developed world.

More than 73 million people in 78 countries that depend on food handouts from the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) are facing reduced rations this year. The increasing scarcity of food is the biggest crisis looming for the world", according to WFP officials.

At the same time, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has warned that rising prices have triggered a food crisis in 36 countries, all of which will need extra help. The threat of malnutrition is the world's forgotten problem", says the World Bank as it demands urgent action.

The bank points out that global food prices have risen by 75% since 2000, while wheat prices have increased by 200%. The cost of other staples such as rice and soya bean have also hit record highs, while corn is at its most expensive in 12 years.

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