

On Monday nights, a small group of my colleagues from both sides of the aisle gather at a Capitol Hill Chinese restaurant and discuss how we can cooperate on various issues. I founded the group, the Center Aisle Caucus, several years ago because I was tired of the partisan gridlock and paralysis in Washington and wanted to spend more time developing solutions and less time blaming each other for problems.

This week, our guest was the head of the United Nations World Food Programme. Her assessment of food prices in the U.S. and the growing famine around the world was startling.

We are in a perfect storm. Food prices are skyrocketing because of many converging factors: voracious demands for food in emerging economies, the skyrocketing cost of fuel for food transport, the economic decisions of farmers to use crops for biofuels rather than food production, droughts around the world that are reducing food supplies and more. As a result, working and middle class families in our community are feeling a painful squeeze. And over 100 million new people around the world may be thrown into "desperation" - on top of the more than 800 million who are already undernourished.

In short, we are looking at a potential global famine that some have described as "biblical" in magnitude. Think of it: one out of six people on earth will experience "food desperation" and even in our community, where we have at least the stitches of a safety net, people are finding it tougher to cope with high food prices.

This is not simply a matter of starvation. It is a matter of global stability. Starvation makes governments fall. Competition for scarce resources escalates military tensions. Desperation breeds demagogues.

President Bush, with whom I profoundly disagree on most issues, has requested additional funds for global food assistance in 2009. Currently, the United Nations World Food Programme has a \$755 million shortage. And with Iraq costing \$2.5 billion a week and further contributing to a gross national debt of over \$9 trillion, and so many unfunded priorities here at home, the U.S. won't be able to carry the burden alone.

That's why I am suggesting the President convene an Emergency World Food Summit with foreign leaders. The summit could seek pledges for assistance from the world community and also cut through some of the logistical difficulties that delay the shipments of food. It would also reassert American humanitarian leadership in the world - an image that has been badly tarnished by the administration's misguided foreign policies.

This is exactly the kind of bipartisan, solution-oriented policy for which the Center Aisle Caucus was created. Democrats and Republicans can blame each other all day long for food prices and shortages. The U.S. can blame China and China can blame the U.S.; farmers can blame Wall Street and Wall Street can blame the farmers. Unfortunately, blame doesn't feed anyone. It won't feed a starving kid in Southern Sudan or bring down the price of a bagel in North Babylon. It's time to act. Now.