

Dear President Trump, Secretary Mnuchin and Secretary Pompeo:

As a broad coalition representing humanitarian, research, peacebuilding, faith-based, human rights, and other civil society organizations, we write to you out of deep concern for the health and well-being of ordinary people in Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, and other heavily-sanctioned locations. We also seek relief for people in Gaza, the West Bank, Yemen, and other countries being sanctioned by U.S. security partners and where U.S. laws and policies sanction non-state groups that control territory or political structures. The current COVID-19 pandemic highlights the precarious and, in some cases, critical state of the health infrastructures and economies of these sanctioned locations, and how, without immediate intervention, millions of people face severe economic hardship, infection, and death.

We support UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his recent call “for the waiving of sanctions that can undermine countries’ capacity to respond to the pandemic.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we urge you to:

**1) Issue emergency universal exemptions for humanitarian goods.** The exemptions could take the form of an emergency universal general license that would allow humanitarian agencies to respond to the crisis quickly and more effectively.

The license would need to, at minimum, exempt:

- 1) Aid necessary for the treatment of COVID-19;
- 2) Equipment used in the recovery of the disease;
- 3) Goods required to address simultaneous needs and issues exacerbated by the pandemic such as food security, water supply, civilian energy infrastructure, and other health-related needs such as medical kits and equipment;
- 4) Necessary training required for the use of medical and humanitarian equipment; and,
- 5) Communication and partnerships with non-sanctioned organizations and individuals. (These exemptions would be necessary for contexts such as North Korea where a specific license is required for partnerships with non-sanctioned organizations and individuals).
- 6) Transactions and communications ordinarily incidental and necessary to accessing civilian populations in need of assistance.

Finally, the universal general license must address the reluctance of financial institutions, as well as other entities within supply chains, to carry out transactions required for the delivery of this aid.

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<sup>1</sup><https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/24/un-coronavirus-cuba-iran-venezuela-north-korea-zimbabwe-sanctions-pandemic/>

**2) Implement reporting protocols that monitor the impact and human cost of sanctions.** High COVID-19 related death rates in heavily-sanctioned countries illustrate the grave consequences of deficient healthcare infrastructures, weakened in part by sanctions. In 2019, the Government Accountability Office issued a report that noted that, “[s]anctions may also have unintended consequences for targeted countries, such as negative impacts on human rights or public health.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the report concluded that unilateral sanctions measures are difficult to assess and are not necessarily effective in achieving foreign policy aims. We urge the implementation of regular assessments to better understand the human costs of sanctions and whether sanctions are effective in achieving their purpose.

**3) Suspend broad-based and sectoral sanctions that cause significant economic damage and leave populations more exposed to sickness and disease, food insecurity, and other humanitarian emergencies.** Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of humanitarian and human rights experts warned of the impacts of sanctions on ordinary civilians.

For example, various experts have noted that sanctions were already causing shortages of medical supplies, decimating livelihoods, blocking banking channels, and exacerbating already dire situations in sanctioned countries such as Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, Syria, and other heavily-sanctioned locations.<sup>3456</sup>

These problems are not only devastating for the millions of people living in sanctioned regions, but, at the present moment, they also are a threat to the health and safety of non-sanctioned countries around the world. The swift spread of COVID-19 to every corner of the globe clearly shows that an out-of-control epidemic in just one country is a public health threat for all of us. Broad, sectoral sanctions should be suspended in order to help strengthen, and in some cases rebuild, critical health infrastructures. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has stated:

“At this crucial time, both for global public health reasons, and to support the rights and lives of millions of people in these countries, sectoral sanctions should be eased or suspended. In a context of global pandemic, impeding medical efforts in one country heightens the risk for all of us<sup>7</sup>.”

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-145>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/29/maximum-pressure/us-economic-sanctions-harm-iranians-right-health>

<sup>4</sup> <https://cepr.net/report/economic-sanctions-as-collective-punishment-the-case-of-venezuela/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://undocs.org/S/2019/691>

<sup>6</sup> <https://theintercept.com/document/2016/09/28/humanitarian-impact-of-syria-related-unilateral-restrictive-measures/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25744&LangID=E>

The urgent appeals listed above are based on a commitment to save human lives and build global environments of cooperation. The collective decades of research and on-the-ground experience of signatories to this letter have led us to the conclusion that broad, unilateral sanctions are harming ordinary civilians and inhibiting effective international cooperation to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

We therefore urge you to take immediate emergency measures, and consider long-term measures as well, that would allow the peoples of sanctioned countries to respond to the devastating human and economic fallout of COVID-19.

Sincerely,