



U.S. Sanctions Are Preventing Coronavirus Medical and Relief Supplies From Reaching Vulnerable Populations

The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic crash have created monumental challenges for every country on Earth. But these crises are not affecting all people or all nations equally. Some are facing additional hurdles as a result of broad-based economic sanctions imposed by the United States.

Although intended to influence the policies of governments, these sanctions can have harmful impacts that reach far beyond their intended targets, often claiming the lives of innocent men, women, and children. People in countries such as Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea are struggling to obtain essential food and medical supplies. Even where technical exemptions are in place, the fear of secondary sanctions has had a chilling effect on humanitarian transactions by governments, financial institutions and relief organizations.

A bipartisan solution: Issue a temporary general license that supports humanitarian trade related to COVID-19.

- The U.S. Treasury Department has the power to issue a worldwide, temporary general license authorizing the exportation and re-exportation of medical supplies and equipment and other essential goods that might otherwise be prohibited by sanctions.
- By making it clear these types of financial transactions are allowable, this license would aid in the donation or sale of items such as test kits, respirators, sanitizers, personal protective equipment, and medicine, which are all critical for preventing and treating COVID-19.
- The temporary general license would not require Congress to suspend or repeal sanctions and would only cover the listed types of supplies and equipment.

Why is a new temporary general license needed?

- **A temporary general license is needed because people are suffering right now.** An April 2020 Human Rights Watch [report](#) explained that sanctions have had a particularly detrimental effect on Iran's healthcare system, as the country lacks access to critical medical equipment and medicine despite existing exemptions. UN Human Rights Commissioner Michele Bachelet echoed this point when she called for an [easing of sanctions](#) for COVID-19 relief.

- **Past Republican and Democratic administrations have issued temporary general licenses under similar circumstances.** For example, the George W. Bush administration issued a *temporary license* to permit certain exports to Iran after the devastating Bam earthquake in 2003, which killed about 28,000 Iranians. In 2012 the Obama administration issued a *temporary general license* for humanitarian trade with Iran after an earthquake hit northwestern Iran, killing hundreds.
- **Despite the administration's assurances that sanctions don't bar humanitarian and medical trade, supplies are not getting through.** Nouradin Pirmoazen, a Los Angeles-based thoracic surgeon in regular contact with former colleagues at *Masih Daneshvari Hospital* in Tehran, recently *told* the Washington Post, "There are a lot of shortages now... [Hospitals] do not have enough diagnostic kits or good quality scanners, and there is also a shortage of masks." He continued, "Medical staff who want a specific type of medicine or equipment are having difficulty transferring money outside of Iran due to the sanctions."
- **A temporary general license would give exporters, banks and humanitarian organizations confidence that they would not be penalized for sending needed supplies.** Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, which supports thousands of Afghan refugees in Iran, *commented*, "We have now, for a full year, tried to find banks that are able and willing to transfer money from donors [for our humanitarian operations]. But we are hitting a brick wall on every side. Norwegian and other international banks are afraid of US sanctions to transfer the money that governments have given for our vital aid work."
- **The difficulty of providing supplies to address COVID-19 gives the leaders of countries like Iran and Venezuela an excuse to shift the blame for many of their own failures.** If foreign leaders aren't protecting their populations from COVID-19, it shouldn't be because U.S. sanctions made that more difficult. Such a narrative is extremely harmful to U.S. public diplomacy and America's global image.

The bottom line

Congress should urge the administration to immediately issue a temporary general license to facilitate international humanitarian relief efforts for COVID-19. Such a license could help slow the spread of this virus globally and reduce the suffering of millions.