

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW Washington, D.C. 20500  
December 8, 2021

Dear President Biden,

As faith leaders and directors of faith-based humanitarian organizations, we are writing to you in solidarity with the millions of people around the world facing wide-ranging humanitarian crises from the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect of economic sanctions. Several of our organizations work to support the most vulnerable people in some of the most heavily sanctioned regions in the world, including Iran, Syria, and North Korea, and we witness first-hand the harmful impacts of U.S. economic sanctions. **We urge you to take immediate actions to end these sanctions that are so negatively impacting civilians, especially in this time of COVID-19.**

Although we are told that sanctions are intended to influence the policies of governments, they often have harmful effects far beyond their intended targets, claiming the lives of innocent men, women, and especially children. The most vulnerable – the poor, the elderly, the marginalized – are always hurt worst of all. People in countries such as Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, and Syria are struggling to obtain essential food and medical supplies – because of our sanctions. Even where technical exemptions for food and medicine are in place, they don't work, because the fear of secondary sanctions have a chilling effect on humanitarian transactions by governments, financial institutions, and relief organizations.

For example, in March of 2020, the Washington Post [reported](#) that U.S. sanctions were actively obstructing Iran's access to medicine and equipment. U.S. sanctions are also greatly hindering Iran's efforts to obtain enough COVID-19 [vaccines](#) and harming its ability to effectively slow the spread of the virus, leading to the illness and death of innocent civilians. This is not an isolated situation but is widely felt among sanctioned countries and regions across the globe.

By interfering with the supply of critical essentials, such as electricity, fuel, and metals, broad-based economic sanctions often have severe and negative humanitarian impacts. Many Syrian households have only one or two hours of electricity per day, making high-nutrient foods such as meat and dairy difficult to preserve. A lack of fuel for tractors or other agricultural equipment can limit food production in sanctioned regions. Vaccine distribution relies on cold chain storage, which include items that require special licenses or exemptions in multiple regions.

Specifically, we urge you to:

**Show moral leadership by ending the use of broad economic sanctions that too often result in the deaths of innocents and fail to change government behavior;**

Until sanctions can be lifted, we urge you to **ensure that vaccine manufacturers will never face sanctions for providing vaccines and other COVID-related materials to any sanctioned country.** Lift restrictions on economic resources needed to fight the pandemic. Unfreeze assets of sanctioned countries in U.S. banks so they can purchase COVID-related and humanitarian supplies. Lift financial barriers to help make humanitarian trade easier and ensure that U.S. sanctions do not inhibit economic and humanitarian assistance from multilateral institutions, including emergency loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Encourage

companies like Johnson & Johnson, Moderna, and Pfizer to share patent knowledge for vaccines, increase vaccine production, and create more distribution hubs;

**Expedite exemptions and licensing for humanitarian trade and remove barriers to delivery of humanitarian and economic assistance needed to treat and prevent the spread of COVID-19** as well as support other vital health infrastructure. Prioritize vaccines, personal protective equipment, testing kits, respirators, sanitizers, food, and medicine. Support the work of humanitarian organizations around the world who provide a broad array of lifesaving and life-affirming work including water, sanitation, hygiene, and educational programming. Civil society and aid groups should also be consulted to expand sanctions exceptions to support the flow of humanitarian aid. Support transparency including requiring a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on the humanitarian impact of sanctions.

As people of faith, we are called to love our neighbors. We recognize that the majority of those harmed by economic sanctions are not political leaders, but ordinary people and particularly the most exploited and the most vulnerable – the poor, the displaced, racial and ethnic minorities, widows and orphans. In October, Pope Francis [called](#) on governments to “stop aggression, blockades and unilateral sanctions against any country anywhere on earth.” Earlier this year, another 150 faith leaders [urged](#) governments and pharmaceutical companies to vaccinate the world against COVID-19, affirming that “every person is precious” and that “we have a moral obligation to everyone in every country.” **We agree with these moral calls to action to save innocent lives and again urge your administration to lift broad-based economic sanctions to ensure vital humanitarian access.**

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,

Joyce Ajlouny, General Secretary, **American Friends Service Committee**

Rev. Mark Stephenson, Interim Director, Office of Social Justice, **Christian Reformed Church in North America**

Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon, Executive Director, **Churches for Middle East Peace**

Rev. Dr. Nathan Hosler, Director, Office of Public Policy, **Church of the Brethren**

Rev. Robert Moore, Executive Director, **Coalition for Peace Action**

Rev. Dr. Rafael Malpica Padilla, Executive Director, Service and Justice, **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

Diane Randall, General Secretary, **Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL)**

Susan Gunn, Director, **Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns**

Ann Graber Hershberger, Executive Director, **Mennonite Central Committee U.S.**

Jim Winkler, President & General Secretary, **National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC)**

Marie Dennis, Senior Advisor, **Pax Christi International**

Johnny Zokovitch, Executive Director, **Pax Christi USA**

Rev. Dr. Fahed AbuAkel, former moderator, **Presbyterian Church USA**

Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray, President, **Unitarian Universalist Association**

Mary Katherine Morn, President, **Unitarian Universalist Service Committee**

Rev. Dr. Julia Brown Karimu, President, Division of Overseas Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Co-Executive, Global Ministries of the **Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ**

Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson, Associate General Minister, Wider Church Ministries and Operations, United Church of Christ; Co-Executive, Global Ministries of the **Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ**

Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, General Secretary, the **United Methodist General Board of Church and Society**