

March 27, 2020

Dear President Trump:

We write to you out of deep concern for the people of the Middle East during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. As an international Catholic network with 120 member organizations around the world, we are hearing directly from our partners that daily life for people was already tenuous for many in places such as Iran, Syria, and Gaza and these realities have only become more difficult as a result of COVID-19. **We urge you to ease and suspend¹ sanctions that negatively impact civilian populations and other restrictions that impair governments' abilities to respond to the health crisis. This includes financial sanctions that impact the ability of countries to import much-needed medical supplies and equipment.**

- **Iran:** COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on Iran. Long preceding the current crisis, sanctions have caused a shortage of medicines, medical supplies and equipment in Iran.² We recognize that some steps have already been taken, including allowing humanitarian trade with the Central Bank of Iran. But U.S. sanctions are so sweeping that they impact Iran's entire economy, have made banks unwilling to carry out humanitarian transactions, and make it difficult for other countries to carry out transactions without triggering secondary sanctions. **The U.S. should lift sanctions on Iran that are impairing a response to this crisis.**
- **Syria:** The potential consequence of the virus in Syria is staggering. An estimated 11 million Syrians are already in need of humanitarian assistance, with 6.2 million displaced from their homes.³ Many lack adequate shelter and sanitation. Syria's health care sector has been seriously weakened as a result of military attacks in the ongoing war and the imposition of sweeping sanctions make it difficult to purchase medicines and medical supplies. **Rather than moving forward with implementing additional sanctions, the U.S. should ease sanctions that prohibit the import and purchase of badly-needed medicines and medical supplies and assure banks that such transactions will not trigger a reprisal.**
- **Gaza:** The strict Israeli blockade of Gaza has already made conditions "unlivable" for the residents of Gaza, apart from COVID-19. The UN and other international agencies have repeatedly called attention to shortages of key medicines and medical supplies, with up to 50% of basic medical supplies unavailable at any time.⁴ Population density, broken water and sanitation systems, and a under resourced medical system leave Gaza vulnerable to an uncontrolled COVID-19 outbreak that could also negatively impact Israel. Israel regularly denies permits to patients seeking medical care that is available only outside Gaza and when permission is granted, Israel often denies permits for accompanying family members, especially for parents of children. **The U.S. should immediately press Israel to ensure that medical supplies and technology are provided to Gaza, that patients needing treatment outside of Gaza are given the permits necessary for extended periods of**

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060092>

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/29/iran-sanctions-threatening-health#>

³ https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/03.04.20_-_USG_Syria_Complex_Emergency_Fact_Sheet_5.pdf

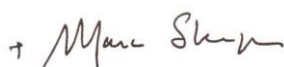
⁴ http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA72/A72_33-en.pdf

treatment, and that family members, especially parents accompanying children, are also granted permits to travel.

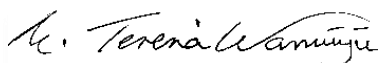
As people of faith, our concern is for the most vulnerable people around the world. At this precarious moment, we call on the U.S. government to extend help to those living in increasingly desperate situations in the Middle East by **suspending sanctions that negatively impact civilian populations and other restrictions that impair governments' abilities to respond to the current pandemic.**

We pray for wisdom and compassion for you in these difficult times.


Sincerely,



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