

Already Failing U.S. Sanctions Make the Pandemic Worse

Despite decades of failure Washington has become giddy with sanctions. An [analysis](#)¹ by the Gibson Dunn law firm found that the Trump administration added about 1,000 people, companies, and entities to sanctions lists during 2017, nearly 30 percent more than the number added during former President Barack Obama's last year in office. The growth in sanctions is more based on politics than efficacy. U.S. sanctions exacerbate the suffering caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, creating a wake up call to reevaluate sanctions policy. Although sanctions are usually portrayed as an alternative to war, more often than not it is the civilians of the targeted nation bearing the brunt of the suffering. Hence, [NGOs representing 40 million](#)² supporters want sanctions lifted and reformed.

Sanctions Take an Extensive Toll on Civilians

- Even when sanctions are targeted, they frequently carry unintended consequences for the innocent civilians in a country. During unprecedented flooding in Iran last year, for instance, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [cited unilateral sanctions](#)³ by the Trump administration as a barrier to their support efforts.
- [Human rights scholars](#)⁴ have noted that “the Iranian people have faced humanitarian threats, in particular, lack of access to pharmaceuticals, medical supplies and health-care, poverty, high inflation and high unemployment” due to unilateral sanctions by the U.S.
- U.S. sanctions are increasing the suffering of the Venezuelan people. [Economist Marc Weisbrot points out](#)⁵ that, “Though the government’s economic policies have played a role in Venezuela’s woes, the Trump sanctions have made things considerably worse since August 2017, decimating the oil industry and worsening shortages of medicine that have killed many Venezuelans. The Trump sanctions also make it nearly impossible for the government to take the necessary measures to exit from hyperinflation and depression.”
- A 2019 [Korea Peace Now! report](#)⁶ showed that while in theory North Korean sanctions are meant to exempt humanitarian items, “[l]ife-saving aid is being fatally obstructed by delays, red tape, and overcompliance with financial sanctions,” further sustaining the humanitarian crisis and causing “with reasonable certainty” nearly 4000 civilian deaths in 2018.

Sanctions Complicate Fighting Against Covid-19

Sanctions are worsening Coronavirus suffering and death in Iran and harming healthcare efforts in North Korea, Venezuela, Syria, Nicaragua and the Palestinian territories. Given the interconnected nature of our world, one country’s failures to contain and control the pandemic becomes a global threat. “This is the time for solidarity not exclusion,” [said](#)⁷ U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres.

- Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has warned that sanctions are [exacerbating the impact of Covid](#)⁸ in many countries and hurting their ability to battle the virus. “The majority of these states have frail or weak health systems. Progress in upholding human rights is essential to improve those systems – but obstacles to the import

¹ 2017 Year-End Sanction Update, Gibson Dunn, February 5, 2018

² Lift Sanctions, Save Lives, Sign On Letter, April 23, 2020

³ UPDATE 3-Unprecedented flooding hits Iran, forces village evacuations, Reuters, March 26, 2019

⁴ Bagheri, Saeed and Amin Bagheri, *Civilian Life at Risk in Iran: The Hard-Hitting Effects of the US Economic Sanctions*, Oxford Human Rights Hub, August 5, 2019

⁵ Weisbrot, Mark, *Trump Sanctions, Regime Change Strategy in Venezuela Can Only Cause More Violence and Suffering*, Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2, 2019

⁶ *The Human Costs and Gendered Impact of Sanctions on North Korea*, Korea Peace Now!, October 2019

⁷ Lynch, Colum, *U.N. Calls for Rolling Back Sanctions to Battle Pandemic*, Foreign Policy, March 24, 2020

⁸ *Ease sanctions against countries fighting COVID-19: UN human rights chief*, UN News, March 24, 2020

of vital medical supplies, including over-compliance with sanctions by banks, will create long-lasting harm to vulnerable communities.”

- The Iranian people have been brutally hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Shocking satellite photos showed mass burial sites for the victims. The Trump administration claims there are humanitarian exemptions to sanctions. However, the regulations are so burdensome and fear of penalties so great, [little humanitarian supplies get through](#)⁹.
- In Venezuela, harsh U.S. sanctions have already helped make the Venezuelan healthcare system the weakest in South America. Even something as basic as [handwashing is difficult](#)¹⁰ for the health care providers who are working so hard to save lives. The free flow of vital medical and humanitarian supplies is curtailed as producers of desperately needed equipment fear being punished by sanctions fines.
- Aid workers in Syria are navigating [restrictions on medical supplies](#)¹¹ to prevent, contain, and treat Covid-19, and are struggling to prepare personnel in a healthcare system already weakened by nearly a decade of war.

Sanctions Have Failed, Maximum Diplomacy Works Better than Maximum Pressure

- Secretary of State John Kerry often [pointed out](#)¹² that years of sanctions failed to coerce compliance with Iran. “In 2003, when the Iranians made an offer to the former [Bush] administration with respect to their nuclear program, there were 164 centrifuges. That offer was not taken. Subsequently, sanctions came in, and today there are 19,000 centrifuges and growing.” Diplomacy, not sanctions, successfully addressed the U.S.-Iran conflict.
- When President Obama loosened economic sanctions on Cuba, [he highlighted](#)¹³ problems with sanctions policy that apply to every country we impose broad based sanctions on: “It does not serve America’s interests, or the Cuban people, to try to push Cuba toward collapse. Even if that worked — and it hasn’t for 50 years — we know from hard-earned experience that countries are more likely to enjoy lasting transformation if their people are not subjected to chaos.”
- Sanctions have failed with North Korea as well, from the sanctions that lead to North Korea’s initial nuclear tests to the recent failure of the U.S. “maximum pressure” strategy. “No amount of sanctions will stop North Korea,” Jae Ku, director of the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, [has said](#)¹⁴. “Nuclear weapons are their sole survival strategy.” Diplomacy and a more lasting peace agreement is the only path forward and sanctions provide an excuse for avoiding forceful and creative diplomacy.

Steps Members of Congress Can Take

- **Cosponsor the *Congressional Oversight of Sanctions Act*, [H.R. 5879](#) introduced by Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN)** to give Congress oversight on sanctions the President imposes using national emergency authorities.
- **Cosponsor the *Enhancing North Korea Humanitarian Assistance Act*, [S. 3908](#) introduced by Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA) and [H.R. 7218](#) introduced by Rep. Andy Levin (D-MI)**, to expedite the provision of humanitarian assistance, including life-saving medical care, to the people of North Korea.
- **Call on the Trump administration to grant sanctions relief** on countries amid the global fight against novel coronavirus.

⁹ Kahalzadeh, Hadi, *Sanctions Make the Coronavirus More Deadly*, Foreign Affairs, April 2, 2020

¹⁰ Page, Kathleen and Tamara Taraciuk Broner, *Venezuela’s Health Care Crisis Now Poses a Global Threat*, Foreign Policy, March 12, 2020

¹¹ *Syria: Aid Restrictions Hinder Covid-19 Response*, Human Rights Watch, April 28, 2020

¹² *Iran enrichment capacity expanded dramatically on Obama’s watch*, Fox News, December 4, 2013

¹³ Obama, Barack, *Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes*, Office of the Press Secretary, December 17, 2014

¹⁴ Hudson, John, David Francis, *Why Did Sanctions Fail Against North Korea?*, Foreign Policy, September 9, 2016