



# CORONAVIRUS

# EXPLAINER

CONGRESSIONAL  
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## Foreign Policy and International Affairs

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### Context

The global coronavirus outbreak poses unprecedented challenges to America's foreign policy and international affairs. At this moment, we are more aware than ever that protecting public health and security does not stop at our nation's borders — and that what the United States does or doesn't do around the world has a huge impact on other populations. The COVID-19 pandemic won't be stopped until it is brought under control in every part of the world. This document provides some of the best thinking from across the progressive foreign policy landscape about shortcomings in America's current foreign policy posture that should be addressed to make our nation a more resilient and reliable global partner, as the current global pandemic has so vividly illustrated.

### US Humanitarian and Development Assistance

#### ***Increase Appropriations for USAID and Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance***

A coalition of global relief and development organizations have called on the House and Senate Appropriations Committees for emergency appropriations through the Economic Support Fund for global efforts to curtail the spread of COVID-19, support critical health infrastructure and public health education efforts, and cushion the economic impacts.<sup>1</sup> The first coronavirus bill (H.R. 6074) appropriated \$435 million for global health response, \$300 million for humanitarian assistance, \$250 for economic and security stabilization. The CARES Act (H.R. 748) appropriated \$350 million for migration and refugee assistance and \$258 million for international disaster assistance.

*What to do:* Immediately pass additional emergency appropriations to allow expedited USAID hiring, support R&D for COVID-19 responses, strengthen food security programs, and extend appropriations into FY21 to allow for stable fiscal footing for the response for at least six months.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Sen. Richard Shelby, Rep. Nita Lowey, Sen. Patrick Leahy, Rep. Kay Granger, March 19, 2020, coalition led by Bread for the World, CARE USA, Catholic Relief Services, and 11 other groups.

### **Support Multilateral Development Institution Efforts to Shore Up Coronavirus Response**

CEPR and other groups that work on international financial institutions (IFIs) call for a significant increase in short-term funding to developing countries,<sup>2</sup> through a major issuance of International Monetary Fund (IMF) Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) and a moratorium on debt service payments to international financial institutions<sup>3</sup> to help developing countries deal with the public health and economic crises provoked by the pandemic. IMF President Kristalina Georgieva has indicated her support for a major SDR issuance and debt relief for poor countries,<sup>4</sup> but the US government must support these solutions, which will require a strong push from Congress. At the same time, other multilateral agencies like the World Health Organization and UN agencies which rely heavily on American financing will need emergency infusions of funding. The CARES Act authorized US participation in recapitalization and replenishment of IFIs and increased US participation in IMF arrangements to support fragile economies affected by coronavirus.

*What to do:* American leadership is critical to move the international financial institutions toward debt relief and emergency funding. Congress must call on the US Treasury to work with the IFIs to take strong action so that developing nations have the resources needed to meet immediate needs in the face of the pandemic. This includes a major issuance of SDRs by the IMF. Furthermore Congress must be prepared to increase contributions to WHO and other UN agencies working to combat the coronavirus. Finally, Congress should consider supporting large-scale debt relief for countries facing the coronavirus with inadequate health care systems.

## **Sanctions and Foreign Assistance**

### **Sanctions Further Jeopardize Public Health in the Face of the Pandemic**

Economic sanctions are often described as an alternative to war, but American sanctions against Venezuela, Iran, Cuba, and other countries are furthering suffering and resulting in even greater loss of life. Iran has borne among the worst human tolls in the world with at least 3036 coronavirus deaths and over 47,000 coronavirus cases reported to date. Venezuela's economically crippled society is jeopardized with the expansion of the virus in Latin America.

Despite claims of humanitarian exemptions, American sanctions severely restrict imports of medications and medical equipment, and the maintenance of water, sanitation, and health care infrastructure critical to protecting public health.<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, Professor of Economics

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<sup>2</sup> CEPR, "G20 Should Call for IMF to Issue 3 Trillion SDRs, CEPR Economists Say," March 26, 2020, <https://cepr.net/press-release/g20-should-call-for-imf-to-issue-3-trillion-sdrs-cepr-economists-say/>

<sup>3</sup> Jubilee USA, IMF Announces Coronavirus Debt Relief and Increased Lending Resources," March 27, 2020, [https://www.jubileeusa.org/pr\\_imf\\_ccr\\_announcement\\_2020](https://www.jubileeusa.org/pr_imf_ccr_announcement_2020)

<sup>4</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Remarks by IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva during an Extraordinary G20 Leaders' Summit, March 26, 2020," <http://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/03/26/pr20108-remarks-by-imf-managing-director-during-an-extraordinary-g20-leaders-summit>

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Pres. Trump, Sec. Pompeo, Sec. Mnuchin, March 20, 2020, coalition led by Foreign Policy for America, Friends Committee on National Legislation, National Iranian American Council Action, and other groups, in Middle East Eye, "Coronavirus: 25 organisations press Trump administration to lift US sanctions on Iran," March 20, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-iran-usa-sanctions-trump-administration-tehran-covid19>

and Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University, says, “The Trump administration is using sanctions against Iran and Venezuela to pressure those governments by inducing widespread suffering.... It is imperative that the US lift these immoral and illegal sanctions to enable Iran and Venezuela to confront the epidemic as effectively and rapidly as possible.”<sup>6</sup> The Secretary-General of the United Nations told the G-20 he is “encouraging the waiving of sanctions imposed on countries to ensure access to food, essential health supplies, and COVID-19 medical support. This is the time for solidarity, not exclusion.”<sup>7</sup>

It is troubling that the U.S. has instead imposed new sanctions on Iran, targeting the petrochemical sector and assets of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as the country’s COVID-19 death toll climbs.<sup>8</sup> Already, although the Trump administration has technically maintained an exemption from sanctions on the sale of humanitarian items, the “broad U.S. restrictions on Iran’s banking system and the embargo on its oil exports have limited Tehran’s ability to finance and purchase essential items from abroad, including drugs as well as the raw materials and equipment needed to manufacture medicines domestically.”<sup>9</sup> This is unconscionable in the face of a global pandemic. Similarly, in Venezuela, the Washington Office on Latin America calls for sanctions relief on Venezuela and allowance of oil sales to provide funding for government operations and humanitarian assistance.<sup>10</sup>

*What to do:* Congress must exercise its oversight powers on foreign policy and seek to have sanctions lifted in order to allow medication, medical supplies, and critical infrastructure to flow to affected countries. We must shift from sanctions toward diplomatic engagement, including constructive engagement on public health efforts with sanctioned governments. Furthermore, the U.S. should support efforts towards a common agreement between all sides in Venezuela in order to seek external help from the IFIs to meet public needs in the face of the pandemic.

### ***Refugees Are Uniquely Vulnerable and Must Be Protected***

Refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people face grave risks in the pandemic. With limited access to clean water, soap, medications, and medical equipment, an outbreak in a refugee camp or detention center threatens to become catastrophic. Hand-washing and social distancing — recommended by experts — are impossible in crowded camps.

*What to do:* Congress should ensure that refugee camps and centers are included in the global response, and that governments hosting refugees and asylum seekers live up to obligations under international humanitarian principles to provide healthcare and services.

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<sup>6</sup> CEPR, “US Government Should Immediately Lift Economic Sanctions to Avoid Causing More Deaths From Pandemic, Economists Say,” March 18, 2020, <https://cepr.net/press-release/us-government-should-immediately-lift-economic-sanctions-to-avoid-causing-more-deaths-from-pandemic-economists-say/>

<sup>7</sup> UN News, “G-20 summit provides chance to rally strongly against coronavirus threat: UN chief,” March 24, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060142>

<sup>8</sup> Middle East Eye, “US announces new sanctions on Iran despite coronavirus crisis, March 27, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-announces-new-sanctions-against-iran-amid-coronavirus-crisis>

<sup>9</sup> Erin Cunningham, “As coronavirus cases explode in Iran, U.S. sanctions hinder its access to drugs and medical equipment,” Washington Post, March 29, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/as-coronavirus-cases-explode-in-iran-us-sanctions-hinder-its-access-to-drugs-and-medical-equipment/2020/03/28/0656a196-6aba-11ea-b199-3a9799c54512\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/as-coronavirus-cases-explode-in-iran-us-sanctions-hinder-its-access-to-drugs-and-medical-equipment/2020/03/28/0656a196-6aba-11ea-b199-3a9799c54512_story.html)

<sup>10</sup> WOLA, “The U.S. Should Encourage a Humanitarian Agreement, Offer Sanctions Relief in Venezuela,” March 25, 2020, <https://www.wola.org/2020/03/venezuela-humanitarian-agreement-covid19/>

Multilateral agencies serving the needs of refugees, such as the UN High Commission on Refugees and the UN Refugee and Works Administration, must receive financial and political support from the Congress.

## Military Budgets

### **Freeze the Military Budget; Don't Bloat Military Spending**

Bullets and tanks and planes are useless against a virus. Yet the Trump Administration calls for increased military spending at a time when the Pentagon cannot responsibly spend the \$738 billion it already has in FY20. When the military is asked to provide field hospitals or share medical equipment, Win Without War, Ploughshares, and other progressive organizations demand that existing military resources be spent on coronavirus response, instead of funneling more public money into the military and defense contractors.<sup>11</sup> Experts from the Institute for Policy Studies and the Poor People's Campaign have called for greater civilian public health control over military resources in the coronavirus response.<sup>12</sup>

*What to do:* Ensure that Congress exercises the power of the purse to ensure that Pentagon and defense contractor budgets are not further bloated in COVID-19 emergency response. The third emergency aid package appropriated an additional \$10 billion to the military. Instead of more taxpayer money, coronavirus-related expenses for the military should come out of unused allocations in the existing military budget, including the Overseas Contingency Operations Fund.

## Trade and Flow of Food and Essential Goods

### **Ensure that Nations Do Not Close Borders to Food and Essential Goods**

The World Food Programme and the World Health Organization warn that a great threat may be interruptions in the supply chain of food, medical supplies, and other essential goods as nations shut their borders to prevent the spread of COVID-19: "WHO continues to advocate for no restrictions to travel and trade, however, countries will act based on their own risk assessments and some supply chains may be affected."<sup>13</sup>

*What to do:* As nations work to slow the spread of the virus, including border closings and restrictions on trade, Congress should ensure that food, medical supplies, medication, and other essential goods are allowed to flow to areas of need without further delay.

## Human Rights

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<sup>11</sup> Win Without War, "5 Key Demands: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Face of the Coronavirus," March 20, 2020, <https://winwithoutwar.org/policy/5-key-demands-u-s-foreign-policy-in-the-face-of-the-coronavirus/>

<sup>12</sup> William Barber and Phyllis Bennis, "To Fight This Pandemic, We Need to Take Over the Military's Resources—Not the Other Way Around," March 23, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/redirect-military-resources-civilian-needs-coronavirus-1493831>

<sup>13</sup> Jane Howard, World Food Programme, quoted in Reuters, "EXPERT VIEWS-How coronavirus is affecting the world's most vulnerable," March 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-aid/expert-views-how-coronavirus-is-affecting-the-worlds-most-vulnerable-idUSL8N2B5845>

### ***Coronavirus Responses Must Not Deny People Basic Human Rights***

As nations work frantically to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, basic human rights must not be abridged. Authoritarian governments are already beginning to use the public health crisis as an excuse to increase surveillance of civilian populations, restrict movements, and clamp down on free speech and expression. In emergencies, powers flow to the executive branch, and those powers may be abused. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law warns that governments that seize such powers during a public health emergency may not surrender those powers and increase control over civilians.<sup>14</sup>

*What to do:* Congress should ensure that nations receiving humanitarian and development aid in the COVID-19 outbreak do not use the pandemic to curtail human rights standards.

### **Invest in Global Pandemic Identification Capacity**

#### ***Federal Investments for Pandemic Response Must Be Redoubled***

In the early days of the Trump Administration, the Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense at the National Security Council was rolled into a larger bureaucratic division, and lost its primary focus on infectious disease outbreaks.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Global Health Initiative research teams in Asia, Central Africa and elsewhere that were tasked with identifying new infectious diseases saw staffing, funding, and capacity reduced by up to 80%.<sup>16</sup> We should have known better. Ebola, SARS, MERS, and now COVID-19 show that investments in pandemic response must be global in scale, as diseases quickly cross borders and oceans .

*What to do:* In future appropriations for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Agency for International Development, and other agencies, Congress should ensure that American expertise is placed globally to detect new diseases in humans and animals before they risk becoming global threats. At the Executive level, the NSC Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense should be reconstituted with its original focus on emerging disease and biological hazards.

### **Wildlife and Zoonotic Disease**

#### ***COVID-19 is Another Urgent Reminder to End the Global Illegal Wildlife Trade***

The novel coronavirus COVID-19 is believed to have originated in the wildlife trade, evolving from viruses harbored in bats and pangolins. Wildlife Conservation Society and other groups call on the urgent need for American leadership to address the international illegal wildlife trade: "Facing such a vast, unknown and unpredictable universe of zoonotic agents, we firmly believe that limiting the chances of contact between human and wild animals is the most effective way to reduce the risk of emergence of new zoonotic diseases."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, "Coronavirus and Civic Space: Preserving Human Rights During a Pandemic," March 10, 2020. <http://www.icnl.org/post/analysis/coronavirus-and-civic-space>

<sup>15</sup> Glenn Kessler and Meg Kelly, "Was the White House office for global pandemics eliminated?," Washington Post, March 20, 2020,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/20/was-white-house-office-global-pandemics-eliminated/>

<sup>16</sup> Sun, Lena, "CDC to cut by 80 percent efforts to prevent global disease outbreak," Washington Post, Feb. 1, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2018/02/01/cdc-to-cut-by-80-percent-efforts-to-prevent-global-disease-outbreak/>

<sup>17</sup> Wildlife Conservation Society, Emerging Zoonoses and the Risk Posed by Wildlife Markets. March 16, 2020. <http://medium.com/@WCS/emerging-zoonoses-and-the-risk-posed-by-wildlife-markets-5689b7ba7ee2>

*What to do:* In the face of Trump Administration efforts to pull back from global wildlife conservation and law enforcement efforts, Congress should redouble support for international legal norms and institutions working to end the global illegal wildlife trade and protect against future zoonotic disease outbreaks.