

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

September 16, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable John Barsa
Acting Administrator
U.S. Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W
Washington, DC 20523

Dear Acting Administrator Barsa and Secretary Pompeo,

We write to urge you to assist the people of Yemen in their time of need by restoring \$73 million in suspended U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funding to Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen and working with the international community and warring parties to disburse critical medical supplies needed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within Yemen. As you are aware, the Yemeni people are currently suffering from the world's largest and most acute humanitarian crisis. The war has left millions without basic services and starving, accelerated internal displacement, and abetted the spread of disease, including cholera, dengue fever, and COVID-19.^[1] To address this worsening crisis, the United States must resume aid to Yemen and allocate new assistance targeted at countering malnutrition and disease spread.

While USAID faces challenges disbursing aid in Houthi-controlled areas, any suspension risks the lives of countless Yemenis, while letting Houthi leaders off the hook for their own failures. Yemenis faced the world's worst humanitarian crisis before the spread of COVID-19. Core humanitarian principles demand that we continue helping people in need and work through access issues, as USAID does across the world.^[2] Further, cutting humanitarian assistance will prolong the conflict in Yemen by allowing Houthi leadership to deflect blame for their failure onto the United States and lessening U.S. credibility as a voice for peace in Yemen. To be clear, we do not believe the Houthis should be given a pass for impeding the delivery of humanitarian assistance, failing those they rule, and attacking Saudi Arabia, but we also do not believe that the Yemeni people should be punished for these failures.

^[1] "Thousands of Yemenis Flee COVID-19 Hotspots", Lisa Schlein, *Voice of America*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/thousands-yemenis-flee-covid-19-hotspots>

^[2] "OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles", *U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, June 2012. https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf

U.S. assistance will help address urgent healthcare capacity shortfalls in Yemen resulting from years of conflict. Airstrikes led by the Saudi-Emirati coalition against the Houthis have decimated dozens of hospitals and other health care infrastructure since the conflict began in 2015, halving the number of facilities in the country.^[3] Internal displacement caused by the conflict, the destruction of infrastructure alongside the Saudi *de facto* air, land, and sea blockades of Yemen, combine to make Yemen the second hungriest country in the world.^[4] These conditions facilitate the unchecked spread of COVID-19, cholera, and other diseases.

COVID-19 has devastated Yemen, killing roughly 27% of those who contract it, the worst COVID mortality rate in the world. Many of those who have died are healthcare workers, underscoring the desperate need for Yemenis to be able to access medical supplies and protective equipment.^[5] Further, reports indicate that if it spreads unabated, COVID-19 could take enough lives to “exceed the combined toll of war, disease, and hunger over the last five years,” equating to roughly 230,000 deaths.^[6] Current estimates indicate that roughly 80% of Yemen’s population is in need of some form of humanitarian assistance.

We urge the Administration to follow the example of humanitarian agencies, such as the World Food Program, which have been able to utilize biometric accountability measures to prevent fraud and diversion of humanitarian assistance and drawbacks from Houthi efforts to tax aid.^[7] Though we are encouraged by the State Department’s grant of \$225 million in emergency food aid for Yemen through the United Nations World Food Program, we are concerned that this assistance may not reach 70% of the population in Yemen and will not compensate for the medical assistance provided by previously suspended USAID funding, or provide badly-needed personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supplies such as swabs, reagents, hospital and ICU beds, ventilators, and tests.^[8]

We join with numerous U.S. civil society organizations that have called for restoring aid to Yemen, with the added focus of combatting COVID-19.

Sincerely,

^[3] “Attacks on Health Care in Yemen”, *Mwatana for Human Rights / Physicians for Human Rights*, March 2020. <https://mwatana.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Attacks-on-Health-Care-in-Yemen-Report.pdf>

^[4] “Yemen”, *Global Hunger Index*. <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/yemen.html>

^[5] “Coronavirus in Yemen: Almost 100 healthcare workers have died from Covid-19”, *Middle East Eye*, July 24 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-yemen-medical-workers-killed-novel-virus>

^[6] “Yemen and COVID-19: The pandemic exacts its devastating toll”, Omer Karasapan, *Brookings*, June 15, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/06/15/yemen-and-covid-19-the-pandemic-exacts-its-devastating-toll/>

^[7] “Yemen’s Houthis step back on threats to tax aid”, *BBC News*, February 14, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51502992>

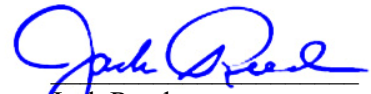
^[8] “U.S. announces \$225 million in emergency aid to Yemen”, *Reuters*, May 6, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-yemen-aid/us-announces-225-million-in-emergency-aid-to-yemen-idUSL8N2CO86C>



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



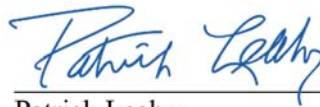
Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



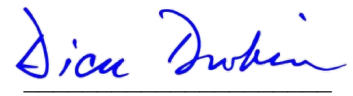
Jack Reed
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



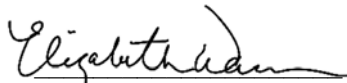
Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



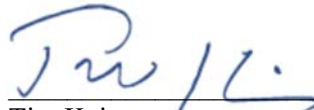
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



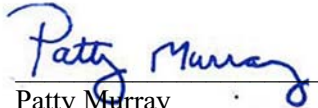
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator

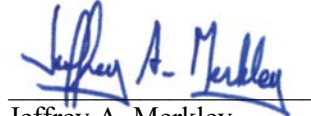



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator


Patty Murray
United States Senator

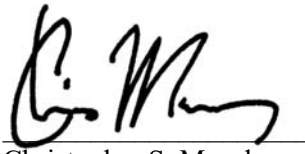

Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

/s/ Cory A. Booker
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator


Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator


Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator


Edward J. Markey
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United States Senator