

Murphy Organizes Senate Effort to Call for Ease of US Sanctions Hindering Response to COVID-19

By [US Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut](#)

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U.S. Senator Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), a member of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on Thursday [sent a letter](#) to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin calling on the United States to ease economic sanctions against countries where sanctions are hindering the humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic – specifically Iran and Venezuela. Sen. Murphy’s letter is co-signed by U.S. Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), Brian Schatz (D-Hawai’i), Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), Tom Carper (D-Del.), Tim Kaine (D-Va.), Ben Cardin (D-Md.), Tom Udall (D-N.M.), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.).

“It hurts our nation’s security and our moral standing in the world when our sanctions policy results in innocent people dying. I am particularly concerned about the impact of sanctions on the COVID-19 response in Iran and Venezuela,” said Murphy.

The senators wrote,

“As these countries struggle to respond to their domestic health crises, U.S. sanctions are hindering the free flow of desperately needed medical and humanitarian supplies due to the broad, chilling effect of sanctions on such transactions, even when there are technical exemption. While the shortcomings of these national governments are largely due to their endemic corruption, mismanagement, and authoritarian behavior, broad-based U.S. sanctions have exacerbated the failing medical response. Helping these nations save lives during this crisis is the right thing to do from a moral perspective, but it is also the right thing to do from a national security perspective.”

Full text of the letter can be found [here](#) and below.

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mnuchin,

We are writing to express our concern regarding the deteriorating humanitarian crises in countries under U.S. sanctions as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread. We are particularly concerned about the impact of sanctions on the COVID-19 response in Iran and Venezuela. As these countries struggle to respond to their domestic health crises, U.S.

sanctions are hindering the free flow of desperately needed medical and humanitarian supplies due to the broad chilling effect of sanctions on such transactions, even when there are technical exemptions.

While the shortcomings of these national governments are largely due to their endemic corruption, mismanagement, and authoritarian behavior, broad-based U.S. sanctions have exacerbated the failing medical response. Helping these nations save lives during this crisis is the right thing to do from a moral perspective, but it is also the right thing to do from a national security perspective. The Iranian and Venezuelan regimes are American adversaries, but the good people of these nations are not our enemy. By allowing our sanctions to contribute to the exceptional pain and suffering brought about by the coronavirus outbreaks in both nations, we play into the anti-Americanism that is at the heart of both regimes' hold on power.

Importantly, there is ample precedent for providing short-term, targeted sanctions relief to facilitate humanitarian and medical assistance. For instance, when a massive earthquake struck Iran in 2003 killing 26,000 people, the Bush administration temporarily suspended sanctions to send 150,000 pounds of medical supplies and more than 200 aid workers on military aircraft to help the people of Iran recover. Short term abeyance of sanctions does not weaken our nation—it strengthens it by showing that above all else, America cares about the preservation of human life.

As you know, Iran is experiencing one of the worst outbreaks of the coronavirus in the world, and the situation continues to deteriorate. As of March 23, the death toll in Iran from COVID-19 infections is more than 1,800, with researchers stating that deaths could stretch into the millions. U.S. sanctions have had a clear impact on the ability of Iran's medical industry to cope with the crisis. Human Rights Watch reported in 2019 that U.S. sanctions on Iran had "drastically constrained the ability of the country to finance humanitarian imports, including medicines, causing serious hardships for ordinary Iranians and threatening their right to health."

Venezuela's medical system is in freefall. Only 25 percent of doctors have reliable running water in their hospitals and clinics, while two-thirds do not have gloves, masks, soap, goggles or scrubs. While the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Venezuela remains relatively small, the dysfunction of the healthcare system and the inability to adequately test undermines the accuracy of such statistics. Humanitarian organizations report that over-compliance by businesses fearful of violating U.S. sanctions has undermined their ability to get medical goods and equipment to the Venezuelan people.

We understand that the administration has stated that humanitarian and medical needs are exempt from U.S. sanctions, but our sanctions regime is so broad that medical suppliers and relief organizations simply steer clear of doing business in Iran and Venezuela in fear of accidentally getting caught up in the U.S. sanctions web. Moreover, the administration's decision to impose additional new sanctions in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak has only contributed to the sense among companies that they should avoid doing any business involving these countries, even if their work is humanitarian in nature. To improve clarity and ensure that our sanctions do not exacerbate the health crises in Iran and Venezuela, we call on the administration to provide:

- A clear general license authorizing specific medical goods and equipment to

facilitate international relief efforts. This license would aid in the donation or sale of items including testing kits, respiratory devices, personal protective equipment and medicine.

- Proactive efforts to establish new financial channels for sanctioned countries to pay for humanitarian goods.
- A 90-day waiver of sectoral sanctions that impede a rapid humanitarian response.
- Unconditional delivery of aid through a third-party country or entity.
- In Iran, an easing of sanctions barring technology companies from delivering services to the Iranian people, which inhibits the spread of public information on how to combat the virus.

One of America's greatest sources of strength is our reputation as a compassionate nation. But at this moment, strategic rivals like China are attempting to undermine our leadership by criticizing U.S. sanctions policy while sending medical aid to countries like Venezuela and Iran. In order to counter Chinese influence as well as protect the health of millions of people, we encourage you to implement targeted U.S. sanctions relief in countries including Iran and Venezuela for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Doing so would send the irrefutable message that while the United States opposes these regimes, we will always stand with their citizens.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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Featured image: A person in protective clothing walks through a temporary 2,000-bed field hospital for COVID-19 coronavirus patients set up by the Iranian army at the international exhibition center in northern Tehran, Iran, March 26, 2020. Ebrahim Noroozi | AP

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