

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 11, 2021

Dear President Biden:

We are writing to express our strong support for the COVID-19 sanctions relief review that is included in your National Security Directive on United States Global Leadership to Strengthen the International COVID-19 Response and to Advance Global Health Security and Biological Preparedness.

Dozens of Members of Congress expressed grave concern to the previous administration about the way that U.S. sanctions were hampering a global response to both the public health crisis and the economic crisis perpetuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing protocols and licenses have proved woefully insufficient to meet the enormity of the challenges shared by people around the world in the face of the pandemic. Even when licenses and humanitarian exemptions are available, moreover, there is a persistent problem of overcompliance, particularly from the financial sector. This has led to catastrophic humanitarian consequences in various parts of the world.

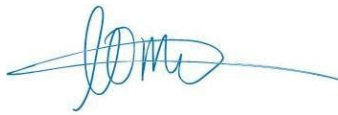
It is both a moral and public health imperative that our efforts to combat COVID-19 are global in scope because the pandemic's economic consequences require international cooperation. The pandemic does not adhere to borders, nor does it account for complex geopolitical realities—until the virus is eradicated everywhere, it is not eradicated anywhere.

We encourage you to consult with national and international organizations who have done much of the legwork on this issue already, including the World Health Organization, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and various human rights and humanitarian organizations.

We are also hopeful that this review indicates a willingness on the part of your Administration to consider the humanitarian impacts of sanctions more broadly. Far too often and for far too long, sanctions have been imposed as a knee-jerk reaction without a measured and considered assessment of their impacts. Sanctions are easy to put in place, but notoriously difficult to lift. And while they have demonstrably harmed civilian populations, caused authoritarian governments to further constrict civil spaces and repress civil and political rights, squeezed the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide support during crises and disasters, made basic staples such as food, medicine, and gasoline prohibitively expensive, created and fueled black market economies, and driven our rivals deeper into dependency on one another, we have historically not conducted regular assessments to determine how sanctions connect to the policy outcomes they seek to achieve so that it's often difficult to demonstrably prove their net benefit to national interests and security.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as an existential threat with no geographic or political limits, has laid bare the interconnectedness of people around the world. We are profoundly grateful for the leadership you have demonstrated by ordering this comprehensive review of existing sanctions, eagerly await the results of the review, and stand ready to work with your administration to make much-needed and overdue changes to the way we use sanctions as a foreign policy tool.

Sincerely,



Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Additional signers

Senator Edward J. Markey
Representative Karen Bass
Representative Earl Blumenauer
Representative Cori Bush
Representative Joaquin Castro
Representative David N. Cicilline
Representative Adriano Espaillat
Representative Raúl M. Grijalva
Representative Henry C. "Hank" Johnson Jr.
Representative Barbara Lee
Representative Hakeem Jeffries
Representative Mondaire Jones
Representative Ro Khanna
Representative Zoe Lofgren
Representative Alan Lowenthal
Representative James P. McGovern
Representative Gwen Moore
Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Representative Mark Pocan
Representative Ayanna Pressley
Representative Jan Schakowsky
Representative Rashida Tlaib
Representative Nydia M. Velázquez
Representative Peter Welch

Cc:

The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State
The Honorable Janet Yellen, Secretary of the Treasury
The Honorable Gina Raimondo, Secretary-Designate of Commerce