

March 27, 2019

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chair, Senate Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chair, Senate Committee on
Appropriations
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations,
and Related Programs

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Chair, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee
on State, Foreign Operations, and Related
Programs

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chair, House Committee on Appropriations
Chair, House Appropriations Subcommittee
on State, Foreign Operations, and Related
Programs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Appropriations

The Honorable Harold Rogers
Ranking Member, House Appropriations
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations,
and Related Programs

Dear Members of Congress:

As leaders of organizations deeply involved in programs and advocacy surrounding international humanitarian response, we write to you to share our concerns regarding the dire consequences of the decision by the Trump administration to end all U.S. humanitarian assistance to people in need in the West Bank and Gaza. This funding includes support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and programs implemented by organizations through the Economic Support Fund (ESF) to meet the basic needs of the civilian population. We urge that such U.S. financial support for these critical programs be protected in the 2020 appropriation enacted by the U.S. Congress.

The withholding of financial contributions to UNRWA has already had a significant impact on the lives of Palestinians. While stop-gap funding from other donors has allowed UNRWA to continue providing critical humanitarian assistance in the short-term, predictable support for such critical activities is essential. Moreover, even with stop-gap funding, the agency has been forced to cut back on basic services for children, women, and men in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank and Gaza.

For example, UNRWA has had to reduce programs that provide mobile health and mental health services, as well as job-creation programs. The latter is particularly alarming in places like the Gaza Strip where over fifty percent of the labor force is unemployed. Furthermore, UNRWA reports that cuts to cash-for-work programs made 90,000 refugees highly vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity.

We are also deeply concerned that the elimination of ESF has impacted programs that address food, water, and medical needs in the region. For example, in December 2018, the Congressional Research Service reported that cuts to ESF will directly prevent emergency food aid to nearly 140,000 individuals, access to clean water for as many as 71,000 individuals, and clinical breast cancer treatment for 16,000 women. It has also led to a reduction in the number of people receiving food assistance, and has prevented the launch of programs that would have provided services to 50,000 youth.

We remain particularly alarmed that this decision impacting humanitarian aid to civilians was not based on any assessment of need, but rather designed to punish Palestinian political leaders, as reflected in statements by the President and his administration. This is simply unacceptable as a rationale for denying civilians humanitarian assistance, and a dangerous departure from U.S. policy on international humanitarian assistance.

In 1984, in justifying its decision to provide humanitarian aid to famine-affected Ethiopia, the Reagan administration declared that “a hungry child knows no politics,” and indeed, this sentiment has guided U.S. policy makers for decades. This sentiment was reflected in the international Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative that the United States helped establish during the administration of George W. Bush. That Initiative set out best practices, including the proposition that humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations should be “solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations.”

To be sure, the application of these principles by U.S. administrations has been imperfect, but all U.S. administrations have aspired to them, and the United States should continue to do so. Therefore, we would deeply appreciate your efforts to ensure that Congress, through the appropriations process, protects humanitarian funding to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Palestinians, commensurate with prior years.

Sincerely,

Joyce Ajlouny
General Secretary
American Friends Service Committee

Sean Carroll
President and CEO
American Near East Refugee Aid

J. Ron Byler
Executive Director
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.

Joel Charny
Director
Norwegian Refugee Council USA

Sarah Costa
Executive Director
Women's Refugee Commission

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America,
and Vice-President, The Lutheran World
Federation

Mark Hetfield
President & CEO
HIAS

Margaret Huang
Executive Director
Amnesty International USA

Mohamed S. Idris
Executive Director
American Relief Agency for the Horn of
Africa

Abby Maxman
President and CEO
Oxfam America

David Miliband
President and CEO
International Rescue Committee

Eskinder Negash
Acting Chief Executive Officer
U.S. Committee for Refugees and
Immigrants

Michelle Nunn
President and CEO
CARE USA

Eric Schwartz
President
Refugees International

David A. Weiss
President & CEO
Global Communities

Samuel A. Worthington
Chief Executive Officer
InterAction