

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 26, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

President Trump recently offered assistance to other countries fighting the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic, including North Korea and Iran.¹ This principle of providing humanitarian aid to those in need should also apply to the Palestinian people. We write to urge the Administration to take every reasonable step to provide medicine, medical equipment, and other necessary assistance to the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Palestinian Territories) to prevent a humanitarian disaster.

As of March 24, 2020, there are at least 50 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the West Bank,² and the Palestinian Authority (PA) has declared a state of emergency and set up a joint operations room with Israel to combat the coronavirus pandemic.³ In addition, as of March 24, the first two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in the Gaza Strip, and a quarantine facility has been established on the Gaza side of Egypt's Rafah crossing.⁴ However, Gaza, with a population of approximately 1.8 million people and one of the most densely populated areas of the world, has a weak public health system, and has been subject to a blockade and border restrictions since

¹ The White House, "Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing," March 22, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-8/>; U.S. Department of State, "Vulnerability of North Korean People to Coronavirus Outbreak," February 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/vulnerability-of-north-korean-people-to-coronavirus-outbreak/>.

² World Health Organization, "COVID-19, Situation Report – 64," March 24, 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200324-sitrep-64-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=703b2c40_2; World Health Organization, "Situation in oPt and Eastern Mediterranean Region," March 24, 2020, <http://www.emro.who.int/pse/palestine-news/landing-page-for-covid19.html> ("WHO Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Update 13").

³ The Independent, "Coronavirus: Israel bans all visitors entering the country unless they can self-quarantine for two weeks," Bel Trew, March 9, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/coronavirus-israel-visitor-ban-borders-west-bank-symptoms-a9388806.html>; Jerusalem Post, "Israel, Palestinians set up joint operations room to combat coronavirus," Khaled Abu Toameh, March 18, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israel-Palestinians-set-up-joint-operations-room-to-combat-coronavirus-621431>.

⁴ The Guardian, "Gaza confirms first coronavirus cases as West Bank shuts down," Harriet Sherwood, March 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/22/gaza-confirms-first-coronavirus-cases-as-west-bank-shuts-down>; The Independent, "Coronavirus: Israel bans all visitors entering the country unless they can self-quarantine for two weeks," Bel Trew, March 9, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/coronavirus-israel-visitor-ban-borders-west-bank-symptoms-a9388806.html>.

2007.⁵ According to the United Nations (UN), 38 percent of residents live in poverty, 54 percent are “food insecure,” 35 percent of Gaza’s arable land and 85 percent of its fishing waters “are totally or partially inaccessible due to Israeli military measures,” and more than 90 percent of its water is “undrinkable.”⁶ In addition, “about one-third” of “essential” medications are unavailable, and despite their ability to cross into Egypt, “Gazans remain isolated and cut off from the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory.”⁷ According to a recent news report on the coronavirus, “health ministry officials [in Gaza observed] that just one person infected with the deadly virus would end in ‘complete disaster’ [...] and [there is] no way of isolating the ill or preventing spread of the disease.”⁸ Altogether, these conditions, if compounded by a COVID-19 outbreak in the region, would further endanger the health of Palestinians in the coastal enclave.

Since January 2018, the Administration froze nearly all bilateral aid to the Palestinian people and contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA).⁹ In addition, in August 2018, the Administration announced that the United States would not make further contributions to UNRWA,¹⁰ which supports the basic health care needs of millions of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, and surrounding countries, and reprogrammed hundreds of millions of dollars that had been appropriated for assistance for the Palestinian people.

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 Appropriations Act included \$75 million for humanitarian and development assistance for the Palestinian people.¹¹ Despite that appropriation, and in the face of a COVID-19 outbreak in the West Bank and the beginnings of one in Gaza, as far as we are aware the Administration has not reconsidered its policy of ceasing all bilateral assistance to the Palestinians and all contributions to UNRWA.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented health, diplomatic, and economic threat, and it is in the national security interest of the United States and in the interest of the

⁵ United Nations, “Humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip Fast facts – OCHA factsheet,” <https://www.un.org/unispal/humanitarian-situation-in-the-gaza-strip-fast-facts-ocha-factsheet/>; Associated Press, “Israel’s Gaza blockade under scrutiny after latest violence,” Josef Federman, May 6, 2019, <https://apnews.com/7cc0aa222e1147f1bdab3a17d0662454>.

⁶ United Nations, “Humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip Fast facts – OCHA factsheet,” <https://www.un.org/unispal/humanitarian-situation-in-the-gaza-strip-fast-facts-ocha-factsheet/>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ The Independent, “Coronavirus: Israel bans all visitors entering the country unless they can self-quarantine for two weeks,” Bel Trew, March 9, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/coronavirus-israel-visitor-ban-borders-west-bank-symptoms-a9388806.html>.

⁹ Times of Israel, “US said to freeze \$125 million aid for UN Palestinian refugee agency,” Toi Staff, January 1, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-said-to-freeze-125-million-aid-for-un-palestinian-refugee-agency/>; Haaretz, “Democrats Claim Trump Secretly Froze All Humanitarian Aid to Palestinians,” Amir Tibon, July 12, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-democrats-urge-trump-to-reveal-information-on-palestinian-aid-funding-1.6267788>; BBC News, “US stops all aid to Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza,” Yolande Knell, February 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47095082>.

¹⁰ U.S. State Department, “On U.S. Assistance to UNRWA,” August 31, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/on-u-s-assistance-to-unrwa/>.

¹¹ Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1865/text>; House Committee on Appropriations, Division G, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020, at 44, <https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/democrats.appropriations.house.gov/files/HR%201865%20-%20Division%20G%20-%20SFOPs%20SOM%20FY20.pdf> (“The agreement provides [...] \$75,000,000 [...] for the humanitarian and development needs of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza.”).

Palestinian people and our ally Israel, where there are more than 1,200 confirmed cases,¹² to combat the spread of COVID-19 in the Palestinian Territories. Given the spread of the coronavirus in the West Bank and Gaza, the extreme vulnerability of the health system in Gaza, and the continued withholding of U.S. aid to the Palestinian people, we are concerned that the Administration is failing to take every reasonable step to help combat this public health emergency in the Palestinian Territories.

In the face of this emergency, we ask that you respond to the following questions no later than April 3, 2020:

1. What steps is the Administration taking or planning to help provide the Palestinian people with access to adequate medicine, medical equipment, personnel, and other resources to combat the threat of a major coronavirus health crisis? What, if any, additional authority or other action do you need from Congress to provide coronavirus-related assistance to the Palestinians?
2. When does the Administration plan to obligate \$75 million in Economic Support Funds for assistance for the Palestinians as mandated by the FY 2020 Appropriations Act?
3. How many medical facilities in the West Bank and Gaza are capable of effectively treating and, if medically necessary, quarantining infected patients and medical personnel? If there are any such facilities, please identify them.
4. What steps, if any, is the State Department taking to coordinate with UN relief agencies, foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, or other entities to facilitate the delivery of critically needed medical aid to the Palestinian people to combat the coronavirus? Please describe those efforts. If there are none to date, why not?
5. Has the Administration consulted with the Government of Israel regarding the need to ease existing restrictions on the import into Gaza of medicines and critical health related materials and equipment? What is the status of Israeli plans to ease Gaza border restrictions during this pandemic?

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

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

¹² World Health Organization, "COVID-19, Situation Report – 64," March 24, 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200324-sitrep-64-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=703b2c40_2.

Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Tom Udall
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator