

United States Senate

March 1, 2021

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

The Honorable Gloria Steele
Acting Administrator
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
1300 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20523

Dear Secretary Blinken and Acting Administrator Steele,

We write today to call for a swift reversal of USAID's suspension of humanitarian assistance to northern Yemen, and a reinvigoration of bold diplomacy to bring the conflict to an end. Yemen remains the world's largest single-country humanitarian emergency.¹ Its innocent civilians need our help now more than ever.²

The Yemeni crisis is the direct result of the ongoing conflict between the government and the Houthi rebels, impacting 21 million people who need humanitarian assistance. The spread of COVID-19 in 2020 exacerbated the Yemeni civilians' already perilous existence; they have faced repeated displacement, rising food insecurity, environmental disaster, limited access to assistance, loss of livelihoods, and extreme currency inflation.³ The disproportional impacts of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable demand a flexible response from the United States, the United Nations, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), especially as the people of Yemen grow increasingly desperate.

We commend your actions on February 5th to remove the ill-conceived terrorist designation of the Houthis. Without this move, millions of innocent civilians would have faced large-scale starvation and destitution, and any hope for a political solution to the conflict would have slid

¹ *Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021 (February 2021)*, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Feb 21, 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-needs-overview-2021-february-2021>.

² Edith Lederer, *Yemen Faces the Worst Famine the World Has Seen in Decades, the U.N. Warns*, Time News (Feb 24, 2021), <https://time.com/5942270/yemen-famine/>.

³ *Joint INGO letter to USAID*, Norwegian Refugee Council (Aug 20, 2020), <https://www.nrc.no/news/2020/august/joint-ingo-letter-to-usaid/>.

further out of reach.⁴ We are also pleased to see the Biden-Harris administration initially signal its intention to thoroughly review arms sales to the Gulf.⁵ It is critical that the United States plays no role in fueling the Yemen conflict by furnishing offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates.

Our call for humanitarian and diplomatic action is in no way meant to disregard malign Houthi behavior. Attempts to divert assistance,⁶ launch attacks against neighboring countries,⁷ deny humanitarian access, and advance aggressive military offensives⁸ — such as the one recently launched in Marib — are unacceptable and counterintuitive to peace. We look forward to working closely with Special Envoy Tim Lenderking in support of robust diplomatic efforts over the coming months. Any negotiations on the way forward in Yemen must include the voices of a diverse cross section of Yemenis; sustained peace will not be possible unless local voices are heard and their needs taken into account.

Particularly in complex and protracted emergencies such as the one in Yemen, the delivery of neutral, impartial, and needs-based assistance is a humanitarian imperative.⁹ Over the past several months, INGOs have made demonstrable progress on that front. USAID's own global INGO partners note they are able to reach Yemenis in the densest parts of the country.¹⁰

For all these reasons, we call on USAID to take the following steps, and ask you to advise us in writing by March 10, 2021 whether it intends to do so:

- 1) Reverse the current blanket INGO humanitarian suspension in northern Yemen to ensure that U.S. assistance — specifically, more than \$50 million in congressionally appropriated funds programmed to support medical treatment, vaccinations, water trucking, sanitation, shelter, and food assistance — remains impartial and reaches those in need;
- 2) Avoid any attempts to implement inflexible and uncoordinated future blanket restrictions on INGO-funded grants in Yemen;

⁴ Lara Jakes and Eric Schmitt, *Biden Reverses Trump Terrorist Designation for Houthis in Yemen*, N.Y. Times (Feb 5, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/us/politics/biden-houthi-yemen-terrorist-designation.html>.

⁵ Warren Strobel, *Biden Re-Examining U.S. Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia, U.A.E.*, Wall St. J. (Jan 27, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-freezes-u-s-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-uae-11611773191>.

⁶ Karen McVeigh, *Yemen's Houthi rebels accused of diverting food aid from hungry*, Guardian (June 17, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/17/yemens-houthi-rebels-accused-of-diverting-food-aid-from-hungry>.

⁷ Reuters Staff, *Yemen's Houthis say they carried out drone attack on Saudi airport*, Reuters (Feb 10, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-airport-idUSKBN2AA1IG>.

⁸ Ali Al-Mujahed and Sudarsan Raghavan, *As Biden seeks end to Yemen war, rebels press offensive for strategic province*, Wash. Post (Feb 21, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/yemen-war-marib-houthi-rebel-biden/2021/02/21/7358d090-72c3-11eb-8651-6d3091eac63f_story.html.

⁹ Peter Mauer, *ICRC president to UN Security Council: Space for impartial humanitarian action under threat*, ICRC Statement (April 1, 2019), <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-president-un-security-council-space-impartial-humanitarian-action-under-threat>.

¹⁰ *Joint INGO letter to USAID*, Norwegian Refugee Council (Aug 20, 2020), <https://www.nrc.no/news/2020/august/joint-ingo-letter-to-usaid/>.

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- 3) Approach current and future operational constraints in the same manner countrywide, and implement assistance free of political considerations or pressure; and
- 4) Work collaboratively in partnership with the INGO community to show flexibility in restarting assistance where partners on the ground deem it possible to reach beneficiaries.

We thank you both for your leadership and stand ready to work with you to pursue peace and stability for the people of Yemen. Our humanitarian assistance worldwide — provided solely on the basis of need, not politics — showcases American values during the COVID-19 pandemic and this period of unprecedented need.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

cc: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan
U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Greenfield Thomas