

Re: Preventing a preventable humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan

November 16, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Millions more Afghans will descend into abject poverty this winter and thousands will starve to death unless swift action is taken by the United States and our international partners. Afghans are already running out of food and the U.N. World Food Programme's director for Afghanistan projected that its economy will collapse in a "matter of weeks."

Afghanistan's economy was in dire straits prior to the collapse of the Afghan government. In 2020, tax revenue declined by 7.6% and urban poverty increased to 47.6 % — roughly equal to the country's rural poverty rate.¹ Afghanistan is a classic rentier state and grants finance approximately 75% of public spending.² Domestic revenues fell from 14.1% of the GDP in 2019 to 11.4 % in 2020 with a trade deficit of 27.6% of the GDP.³ Since the Taliban takeover in August, inflation is skyrocketing, particularly the cost of food. Even Afghans with savings in the bank are unable to access those savings consistently with reports of banks and other institutions running out of cash. This is no slow moving trainwreck but one that is already off the rails. The point of no return is just weeks away for millions of Afghans caught between two decades of war and the brutalities of Taliban rule.

We applaud the recent pledge of \$144 million in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. This is in addition to a pledge in September by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of State to distribute \$64 million in humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, which will flow through independent organizations⁴ and more than \$266 million in humanitarian aid pledged in June, including over \$157 million through USAID.⁵ The United States has provided Afghanistan with nearly

¹ *Afghanistan Development Update 2021: Setting Course to Recovery* (Washington, DC: The World Bank Group, 2021), 1-45.

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e406b6f24c2b7fdeb93b56c3116ed8f1-0310012021/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-FINAL.pdf>

² *Afghanistan Development Update 2021*, 1-45.

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e406b6f24c2b7fdeb93b56c3116ed8f1-0310012021/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-FINAL.pdf>

³ *Afghanistan Development Update 2021*, 1-45.

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e406b6f24c2b7fdeb93b56c3116ed8f1-0310012021/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ *The United States Announces Nearly \$64 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2021).

<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/sep-13-2021-united-states-nearly-64-million-additional-humanitarian-assistance-afghanistan>

⁵ *The United States Provides More Than \$266 Million in Humanitarian Assistance for the People of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2021).

\$3.9 billion in humanitarian aid since 2002.⁶ This assistance pales in comparison to the hundreds of billions of dollars spent to build up the armed forces in Afghanistan over the course of the war. For FY2021, Congress appropriated over \$3 billion to the Department of Defense's Afghanistan Security Forces Fund⁷ — nearly equal to the grand total in humanitarian aid over the last two decades. It is our hope that the White House will continue to request that Congress provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan in the years ahead and lawmakers answer that call. But any amount of aid is futile if it cannot reach the Afghan people in time.

The following measures will ensure that U.S. humanitarian aid and international assistance reach vulnerable Afghans before the clock runs out. First, the Office of Foreign Assets Control should grant a more expansive general license exempting aid organizations from sanctions. The U.S. government should make it abundantly clear to these organizations that providing food and healthcare to Afghans will not place them in violation of U.S. laws. Other creative options include direct payments or cash transfers to vulnerable Afghans.⁸ Moreover, critical needs for the Afghan people go beyond essential life-saving support. Programs that provide conflict resolution skills, human rights monitoring, and other fundamental elements of a safe and stable society are needed.

Second, Washington should focus humanitarian aid on Afghanistan's healthcare facilities, some of which have closed due to lack of funding. Lack of access to healthcare disproportionately affects women, and Afghanistan's medical clinics are one of the few settings where the Taliban have demonstrated some willingness to allow women to work. Third, the United States should continue funding Afghan schools and higher education, while also calling on the Taliban to allow girls and women to access all levels of education. Finally, the United States should begin to unconditionally release portions of Da Afghanistan Bank's (Afghanistan Central Bank) \$9.5 billion reserves, much of which is held in the U.S. Federal Reserve, to insert liquidity into Afghanistan's banking system and prevent an economic collapse. While portions of the frozen funds should be released incrementally and unconditionally to prevent the economy from collapsing, the United States could also offer to release all remaining funds in exchange for actions by the Taliban to live up to their stated commitment to permit access to education for Afghan girls and to prevent any use of territory to launch terrorist attacks on other nations.

Some may argue that helping the Afghan people will sometimes inadvertently or indirectly benefit the Taliban as their *de facto* government. This potential reality must be viewed against the imperative of

<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/jun-4-2021-united-states-provides-more-266-million-humanitarian-assistance>

⁶ *The United States Provides More Than \$266 Million in Humanitarian Assistance for the People of Afghanistan*, 2021.

<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/jun-4-2021-united-states-provides-more-266-million-humanitarian-assistance>

⁷ *Fact Sheet: Continued U.S. Support for a Peaceful, Stable Afghanistan*, 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/25/fact-sheet-continued-u-s-support-for-a-peaceful-stable-afghanistan/>

⁸ Robin Emmott, John O'Donnell & Jonathan Landay, *Exclusive: Cash airlifts planned to bypass Taliban and help Afghans - sources* (Brussels, Frankfurt, Washington, DC: Reuters, 2021).

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-cash-airlifts-planned-bypass-taliban-help-afghans-sources-2021-10-07/>

saving lives and preventing unnecessary suffering. An independent auditor could potentially provide oversight of the funds as well. Crippling sanctions, low cash reserves, and economic pain will neither force the Taliban to fundamentally change their positions nor inspire war-weary Afghans to overthrow them. It will only cause suffering and death to everyday Afghans. Cutting off humanitarian aid or needed economic resources through sanctions will not succeed in creating sustainable regime change in Afghanistan when our 20 years of war and occupation failed to do so. It will only punish Afghan civilians for our disapproval of their *de facto* government.

We should not cede diplomatic engagement in Afghanistan exclusively to China, Russia, or our partners in Europe to carry out alone. The Chargé d’Affaires of the United Kingdom’s Mission to Afghanistan recently joined Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s representative to Afghanistan to meet with the Taliban in Kabul. We should also support and engage with the United Nations, international governmental organizations, and prominent NGOs with capacity inside Afghanistan to distribute aid. The United States should also have diplomatic representation inside Afghanistan, even if it falls short of a permanent diplomatic mission for the time being.

The collapse of the Afghan economy and starvation of its people is a preventable disaster. Mr. President, we stand ready and willing to support your efforts to aid the Afghan people. Time is of the essence.

Sincerely,

Jamal Abdi, President, **National Iranian American Council**

Arash Azizzada, Co-Founder, **Afghans for a Better Tomorrow**

Medea Benjamin, Co-Founder, **CODEPINK**

David Cortright, Director of the Global Policy Initiative, **Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame**

Rahna Epting, Executive Director, **MoveOn**

Catherine Gordon, **Presbyterian Church (USA)**

Susan Gunn, Director, **Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns**

Sara Haghdosti, Deputy Director and Senior Strategist, **Win Without War**

William Hartung, Director, Arms & Security Program, **Center for International Policy**

Lora Lumpe, CEO, **The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft**

Paul Kawika Martin, Senior Director, Policy & Political Affairs, **Peace Action**

Diana Ohlbaum, Senior Strategist and Legislative Director for Foreign Policy, **Friends Committee on National Legislation**

Naveed Shah, Political Director, **Common Defense**

Erik Sperling, Executive Director, **Just Foreign Policy**

Masuda Sultan, Advisory Board, **Unfreeze Afghanistan**

Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, President, **Sojourners**

Cc: Honorable Janet Yellen, Secretary of Treasury
Honorable Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State

< For response, please contact Marcus Stanley, Advocacy Director, Quincy Institute marcus@quincyinst.org>