



One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
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www.foreignaffairs.house.gov

June 5, 2020

The Honorable John Barsa
Acting Administrator
U.S. Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20523

Acting Administrator Barsa:

I was concerned to see your letter to the UN Secretary General on May 18th, admonishing the UN to remain focused on “life-saving interventions” and condemning references to “sexual and reproductive health” in their global appeal for COVID.

To be clear, support for sexual and reproductive health (SRH) *is* lifesaving. Women and girls are demonstrably more vulnerable in humanitarian crises, and that has been borne out in this most recent COVID-19 outbreak. Reduced access to emergency services, strain on health systems, and increased instability due to the outbreak put these populations at even greater risk. Research indicates that even a 10% reduction in access to sexual and reproductive health services could result in 28,000 maternal deaths, and more than 168,000 infant deaths.¹

Further, the language you criticize the UN for using is the same language that’s included in other UN humanitarian response plans for Venezuela, Yemen, and many other countries, which the US and the broader international community have widely supported. These efforts include post-rape counseling, protection for women and girls who are displaced, and prevention of gender-based violence. USAID’s own policies call for a minimum level of initial services to prevent and manage the effects of sexual violence, reduce HIV transmission, prevent maternal and newborn child deaths, and ensure that sexual and reproductive health care is available. Further, to my knowledge, USAID has always remained in full compliance with all applicable US laws and policies on reproductive rights.

¹ Guttmacher Institute. Estimates of the Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Low- and Middle-Income Countries. April 16, 2020. Available: <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/ipsrh/2020/04/estimates-potential-impact-covid-19-pandemic-sexual-and-reproductive-health>

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To claim, as you do in your letter, that the UN's global humanitarian appeal advocates "widespread distribution of abortion-inducing drugs and abortion supplies, and for the promotion of abortion in local country settings" is dangerously inaccurate. It politicizes the humanitarian response to COVID that should be unifying under US leadership, not exploited to score political points. Indeed, it's not the UN that is politicizing this issue, but your own administration, which risks violating the Siljander Amendment, prohibiting lobbying for *or against* abortion in foreign assistance. The UN's global humanitarian response plan for COVID seeks to address the expected increase in needs around sexual and reproductive health care, which is a central component to primary health care and humanitarian response.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing global health crisis that requires a comprehensive response with active US leadership. Correspondence like this neither contributes to nor demonstrates leadership. Instead, it adds to a disappointing series of actions by this administration, from "terminating" the US relationship with the World Health Organization in the midst of a pandemic, to donating ventilators without regard to need or expert guidance, to firing of inspectors general who provide critical oversight of US taxpayer dollars.

As the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, I urge you to stop politicizing the historically bipartisan humanitarian assistance the United States provides and ensure that comprehensive life-saving assistance is continued.

Sincerely,



ELIOT L. ENGEL
Chairman