

Submission to the UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order, Dr. Livingstone Sewanyana

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Covid-19 and Multilateralism

1. What is a key obstacle?

A major obstacle to overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic is the practice of some countries, primarily the United States of America, to impose debilitating economic sanctions on other countries. These sanctions, also called Unilateral Coercive Measures, disrupt and paralyze the economy of victim countries. The sanctions usually cause a huge drop in the standard of living, with civilians and the vulnerable population most affected. Currently there are nearly 40 countries and hundreds of millions of people under some form of UCMs.

The negative humanitarian consequences of Unilateral Coercive Measures are even more glaring during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sanctioned countries have great difficulties in obtaining medical material and in paying for equipment and vaccines. As noted by the [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#), *“US sanctions against Iran make it difficult for the country to obtain medical supplies, sanitation equipment, and other goods we now know are necessary to slow the virus’ spread.”*

An [article](#) in the Journal of Medical Economics documents the consequences of sanctions against Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following have all been negatively affected: drug availability, hospital equipment, essential testing equipment, medical and health specialists. The elderly plus mothers, babies and infants have been especially impacted.

During the pandemic, in June 2020, the US started enforcing the “Caesar sanctions” on Syria. This US law makes it illegal to trade with Syria Central Bank or to support any Syrian government construction or reconstruction. The reconstruction of damaged hospitals has been severely hampered. The US law claims the right to apply to any company or individual in any country.

Lilly Martin is an American woman who married a Syrian and has lived there for 25 years. She reports “Syrian public hospitals are still caring for patients free of charge in most cases, but medicines are not free. Some medicines are locally made, but other specialty meds such as chemotherapy drugs must be imported. The US-EU sanction forbids any foreign companies from selling medical supplies or drugs to Syria. There is a humanitarian clause which the firm can

apply for, but in practice the procedure is far too time consuming and costly so the medical needs in Syria are not met.”

Regarding medical equipment and ventilators, she says, “Even if a private hospital found a source for medical equipment and the foreign firm was willing to take the chance to send them their order, how would the Syrian hospital send payment abroad when the US Treasury forbids bank to bank wire transfers from Syria.”

Electricity and gasoline are essential to healthcare and well-being. They are needed for running water pumps, hospital equipment, etc. Yet this area has been especially targeted for attack in the US sanctions. A Syrian citizen reports on the causes of the electricity shortages, “Parts to repair power stations and damaged sub-stations and cables are none-existent due to sanctions. Power is limited to relying on a small number of working power stations and thus electricity only comes a few hours a day. The same is true for most of the big town water pumps which have been damaged. Water authorities are not allowed to import replacement parts or new pumps due to sanctions.”

Venezuela is another country under extreme sanctions. Machinery and auto parts, medicines and the chemicals needed to refine oil have all been blocked leading to shortages of fuel, This has had a devastating impact on the vital infrastructure needed to provide basic public services. Fuel is vital for transportation of medical supplies of food within the country, as well as for the production of electricity. This lack of fuel, plus the lack of spare parts has resulted in frequent electricity outages, affecting medical equipment in hospitals, and food storage. Venezuela has even had a hard time getting vaccines. It was recently reported that Venezuela’s payment for [11 million COVAX vaccinations](#) was blocked by Swiss-based UBS Bank.

Venezuela has been prevented from obtaining medicines, protective equipment, and even water purification chemicals. The latter are needed for proper hygiene and to control the spread of Covid-19.

Sanctions (unilateral coercive measures) are clearly a major source of suffering for the people of targeted countries. They actively seek to undermine the currency causing disastrous inflation. They seek to damage the infrastructure by preventing construction or rebuilding. They seek to prevent trade with other countries. They undermine global solidarity and cooperation.

On paper there are “humanitarian exceptions” to the sanctions, but in real life they do not work. The “exception” paperwork is complex, the responses are slow, and the risks are great.

Banks, insurance companies and manufacturers have been punished with huge fines for violating extraterritorial US sanctions. For example, in 2015 the French bank BNP Paribas was [fined nearly \\$9 billion](#) for violating US sanctions on Cuba, Sudan and Iran.

Individuals are also at risk. Huawei financial officer [Meng Wanzhou](#) was arrested and is under threat of extradition to the USA because of US unilateral sanctions. Even diplomats are not immune from the sweeping claims of extra-territorial rule. The Venezuelan diplomat [Alex Saab](#) is under house arrest in Cape Verde and threatened with extradition to the US. He was arrested travelling from Venezuela to Teheran to obtain a shipment of food and medicines for his beleaguered country.

Another obstacle is that western media has failed to inform the public of this situation. Incredibly, the New York Times has never mentioned “Unilateral Coercive Measures” or the UN Special Rapporteur “Alena Douhan”.

2. What are some solutions?

In November 2020 there was an Arria formula meeting of the UN Security Council with presentations on theme “End Unilateral Coercive Measures Now”. Along with the Ambassadors of China, Russia and other countries, the UN Special Rapporteur Alena Douhan presented an analysis of the negative consequences of sanctions.

In December 2020, the UN General Assembly passed [resolution 75/181](#) stressing that “Unilateral coercive measures are contrary to international law, international humanitarian law, the Charter of the United Nations and the norms and principles governing peaceful relations among States”. The resolution condemns “the continuing unilateral application and enforcement by certain Powers of unilateral coercive measures”.

With a strong majority (70%) of nations in favor of this resolution, it is clear there needs to be consideration of how to enact and enforce it.

UN General Assembly Resolution 75/181 contains a strong criticism of United States policy and asserts that some of the actions are illegal. But this resolution has been ignored and effectively censored by western media. We suggest that there be more consideration how to counteract and overcome western media censorship.

The peoples of many countries around the world are clear. For example a [recent poll](#) in Nicaragua reveals that 83% of rural and urban citizens over 16 believe that the imposition of sanctions by the United States “are a manifestation of the interventionist behaviour of the United States in the internal affairs of our country”.

Intervention in other countries is not new but needs to be more effectively exposed and challenged.

There should be more consideration of how to enforce international law and the UN Charter. The UN Charter provides the best foundation for bringing the world together to fight pandemics and other threats to humanity. We should not allow it to be flouted with impunity. We should consider how to increasingly enforce it.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the urgent need to bring the world together, forge global solidarity and reject claims to exceptionalism.

3. Should there be a New International Treaty for pandemic preparedness and response?

A strengthening of the United Nations collective response to future pandemics is necessary. We agree that a multilateral shared response is necessary to fight pandemics and other health-related global challenges.

We note that the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures has published a [“#COVID-19 Human Rights Guidance Note”](#). This document describes the situation with many excellent recommendations for how to mitigate the damage and respond better in future.

The international community represented in the United Nations General Assembly and led by the Secretary General should take the lead in ensuring the creation of tools for facing such challenges either by a treaty or a new agency set up to create this preparedness.

A treaty is the best solution in the long term since it binds the signatories. In the short term, policy defined by the United Nations General Assembly would be a big step forward. The Secretary General should be empowered to set the process in motion.

Any treaty or other UN General Assembly response related to pandemics and sanctions should provide immediate alternative economic routes for sanctions relief independent of the United States financial dominance and control.

Considerations should include:

- * Green corridors to provide humanitarian relief to populations threatened by sanctions or military war, with monitoring by a neutral party.
- * Facilitation of payments for medical supplies, vaccines and fuel necessary for basic infrastructure
- * Liberation of intellectual property rights to be available to all countries
- * Unlimited Access to scientific knowledge for all

A treaty or General Assembly policy should prohibit any criminal proceedings against a person whose activities with respect to sanctions relief may expose him or her to extradition proceedings.

The treaty or General Assembly policy should provide for reparations for victim countries to be paid by those countries who have caused the unnecessary suffering.

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