

The United States Unilateral Sanctions Against Cuba, Iran and Venezuela

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Introduction

As part of our ongoing efforts to shed light on and challenge the systematic human rights violations of the most vulnerable people in Iran, due to comprehensive unilateral/multilateral coercive measures, Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) has published a series of reports on the ways in which economic sanctions negatively impact the daily life of the civilian citizens in Iran and targeted countries. The first volume in the series addressed the detrimental consequences of the imposed economic sanctions on “patients and the process of the production and distribution of medicines in Iran”; the second volume discussed “corruption and money-laundering” as a result of sanctions; the third volume centered on the economic sanctions forced upon Iran and its people, particularly by “banks and other financial institutions;” the fourth volume focused on “the humanitarian consequences of sanctions”; the fifth volume explored “the impact of sanctions on refugees and migrants in Iran”, the sixth volume reflected on “Sanctions and Medicines”, the seventh volume discussed “Sanctions and the people with Disabilities”, the eighth Volume drew the reader’s attention to “Mal-effects of UCMs on Human Rights under Covid-19”, the ninth Volume recorded the ODVV’s exclusive interview with Prof. Alena Douhan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive Measures on the Enjoyment of Human Rights and the current issue assesses the impact of the United States Unilateral Sanctions on various sections of societies in Cuba, Iran and Venezuela.

The United States Unilateral Sanctions Against Cuba

History

Duration: For nearly 60 years, The United States has enforced an embargo against Cuba, severely restricting the flow of goods to the island. Most US companies are forbidden from dealing with Cuba, and various US laws punish foreign companies that do business in Cuba.

The Obama administration sought to relaxed sanctions, allowed direct flights between the two countries, and eased restrictions on Americans doing business in Cuba. Donald Trump reversed Obama's strategy, placed Cuba back on the US list of state sponsors of international terrorism, cut off travel and trade between the two countries as a major economic lifeline for many Cubans.

Targets: The targets include the whole trade sector influencing almost

all society including the health sector, food, banking transactions and financial services and the trade between Cuba and other countries. In other words, the whole population are targeted by the umbrella trade embargo.

Alleged Reasons: The unilateral Sanctions Were imposed for Cuba decision to nationalized the Cuban oil refineries.¹ The Embargo was Intended to economically squeeze the island and create enough discontent within Cuba to force the ruling Party to either significantly reform or step down.



United Nations Stance:

The United Nations General Assembly has passed a resolution every year since 1992, in condemnation of the extraterritorial reach and demanding the end of the US economic embargo on Cuba, with the US and Israel being the only voters to consistently vote against

the resolutions. See General Assembly resolution 47/19² and subsequent resolutions.³ A/75/L.97

Impact on the Population Health Sector

The 6 decade United States Sanctions have undermined the health

sector, including the response to the health emergency arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The US embargo limited Cubans' capacity to recover from the setbacks and curtailed access to needed inputs, medicines, technologies, and materials to rebuild.

Today, the US embargo hinders Cuba's efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic. The sanctions hamper access to inputs, medical technologies, medical equipment, medicine for specific treatments, as well as to inputs for production of COVID-19 diagnostic tests and the equipment and materials to produce and apply Cuban vaccines in addition to other essential basic items.

The embargo which is materialized in the form of a blockade hinder access to essential items including food, medicine and medical equipment, threatening millions of human lives.

Access to information technology: In this increasingly digital age, the US blockade restricts people's ability to access digital platforms and resources, which have become even more crucial tools for international cooperation, communication, and knowledge exchange, as well as for family relations during the pandemic.

During periods of increased sanctions, students, researchers and



Health Sector: The 6 decade United States Sanctions have undermined the health sector, including the response to the health emergency arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

scholars are increasingly denied opportunities to access academic resources, publish scientific findings, attend scientific meetings, access to essential medical and laboratory supplies and information resources. The information and academic boycotts violate students' and researchers' freedom and curtail progress while free exchange of ideas is needed to optimize global scientific progress.



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Economy: The impact of the extraterritorial sanctions imposed on Cuba by the United States (before their lifting, de jure rather than de facto, in 2016) on the country's ability to conduct commerce with the outside world and access international financial markets has been described as amounting de facto to a global embargo. The embargo has blocked access by Cuba to global financial institutions, as well as the SWIFT financial messaging system, which had severe effects on deepening the economic crisis of Cuba.

The challenges are especially visible now, when the harsher sanctions of the Trump administration and the impact of the COVID pandemic combined have battered the Cuban economy, contributing to shortages in daily life and difficult economic circumstances. The destructive US

policies produce real damage and violate the rights of Cuban citizens and obstruct local economic, social, and environmental development. Without the blockade, the civil population would be capable of earning sufficient income to support their families and the national economy, food security, nutrition education, and sustainable environmental management would be in promising conditions.

Other Impacts: A ban on the import of fuel leading to gasoline and fuel scarcity, adversely affect the daily lives of people making transportation difficult for them. It is proven to leave a more severe impact on women who bear the burden of domestic responsibilities and find it much harder and stressful not to rely on transportation.

According to the Report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in its resolution 74/7, entitled “Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba” (2020), in 2019, the United States have fined of 27 companies, 54 ships, and 3 individuals for transporting fuel to Cuba. The fact that none of the entities sanctioned with financial penalties has been under the jurisdiction of the United States, proves the dangerously extraterritorial reach of the US embargo against Cuba.

The United States Unilateral Sanctions Against Venezuela

History

Duration: The United States of America has imposed sanctions against the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela since 2005, and maintained and added new sanctions to the ones already in place in 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Targets: The targets include thousands of individuals and entities in almost all sectors of the society including the health sector, food, gold and other mining sectors, banking transactions and financial services and shipping sector. In other words, the whole population are targeted by multiple sanctions.

Alleged Reason: The unilateral sanctions were imposed for various reasons including allegation of drug trafficking,⁴ the repression of

Venezuelan protests and enforcing pressure on President Nicolás Maduro.

United Nations Stance:

An at 28th session of the Human Rights Council, based on the resolution 27/21, the collective efforts of the sanctioned States translated to adoption of a Resolution that created the mandate of the UN

Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCM)s on human rights. The mandate has been renewed by subsequent resolutions since the date. The Special Rapporteur has paid a visit to The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in 2020 and has submitted a report to the Council (A/HRC/48/59/Add.2) comprehensively assessing and reprimanding the negative impacts of UCMs on various social strata in the country, offering recommendations in this regard.



Alleged Reason: The unilateral sanctions are imposed for various reasons including allegation of drug trafficking,⁴ the repression of Venezuelan protests and enforcing pressure on President Nicolás Maduro

Impact on the Population

Health Sector

The economic crisis in Venezuela has eroded the country’s health-care infrastructure and threatened the public health of its people.

Shortages in medications, health supplies, interruptions of basic utilities at health-care facilities, and the emigration of health-care workers have led to a progressive decline in the operational capacity of the health care system.

Over the past decade, public health measures in Venezuela have substantially declined. From 2012 to 2016, infant deaths increased by 63% and maternal mortality more than doubled. Since 2016,



outbreaks of the vaccine-preventable diseases measles and diphtheria have spread throughout the region. From 2016 to 2017, Venezuela had the largest rate of increase of malaria in the world, and in 2015, tuberculosis rates were the highest in the country in 40 years. Between 2017 and 2018, most patients who were infected with HIV interrupted

therapy because of a lack of medications.⁵

In 2019, more than 300 000 Venezuelans were at risk due to a lack of lifesaving medications and treatment. Access to medication such as insulin were curtailed because US banks refuse to handle Venezuelan payments for the item. Thousands to millions of people were without access to dialysis, cancer treatment, or therapy for hypertension

and diabetes. Children faced the delay of vaccination or lack of access to antirejection medications after solid organ transplants in Argentina. Children with leukemia awaiting bone marrow transplants abroad were dying. Funds for national health assistance programmers coming from the PDVSA state oil company got frozen.⁶

The Venezuelan economic crisis has detrimentally affected the health-care system and resulted in rising morbidity and mortality. Outbreaks and expanding epidemics of infectious diseases associated with declines in basic public health services threaten the health of the country and the region.

According to the findings of a published study on Venezuela, sanctions death toll was recorded to amount to 40,000 lives in a one-year period (2017–18).⁷



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Food Security and the Right to Food

Non-governmental organizations believe that poverty has increased in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela between 2014 and 2020, affecting 94 per cent of the people.⁸ The Government recognizes that poverty has increased and strives to minimize its effects through

its social programs.

The country produces only 25 per cent of the food it consumes and imports the rest. The drop in oil revenues, exacerbated by the sanctions, provoked a food and nutrition crisis. Between 2015 and 2019, food availability reportedly decreased by 73 per cent as food imports decreased. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recorded an increase in undernourishment or chronic hunger in the country.⁹

According to the data published in 2019, Venezuela appeared as the world's fourth largest food crisis with 9.3 million people acutely food insecure and in need of urgent assistance.¹⁰

While millions of people are living in food insecurity, many have resorted to coping mechanisms as decreasing the number of meals per day; reducing the quality of food; selling household assets and reducing health, clothing and education expenses.

Children are among the groups that need special attention. It was estimated in 2020 that at least 50 per cent of children under 5 years of age were at risk of acute malnutrition; children under 24 months old were the most affected age group, with 36 per cent experiencing acute malnutrition.¹¹

According to Government reports, as of December 2020, 88 per cent of households were receiving supplementary food provided through local committees for supply and production (CLAP), a programme established by the Government in 2017 in response to sanctions and the related food scarcity. The food packages contain basic food

staples such as corn flour, rice, butter, cooking oil, milk powder, sugar, canned fish, vegetables and fruit (usually locally produced), and pork or chicken (depending on availability) to provide complementary proteins, fats and carbohydrates. In a study conducted in 2019, some of older respondents reported that they depended totally on the food packages to survive.¹²



With the tightening of sanctions from 2017 the positive developments and multiple reforms have been undermined and the State's capacity to maintain infrastructure and continue the implementation of social programmes has been challenged

Economy

Under the United States unilateral coercive measures (economic sanctions) Venezuela's internal production remained underdeveloped and could not meet the needs of internal consumption. The economy's decline started in 2014 with the drop in oil prices, which undermined the massive social protection programmes. This was while the poorest strata of society enjoyed the benefits of the social investments of the State for a decade, however, most sections of the society began to suffer from the mal effects of sanctions.

The sanctions deepened the economic and social crisis, with the Government's revenue shrinking to 1 per cent of its pre-sanctions

revenue. Foreign trade decreased due to the blocking of State assets and the complexity of – and banning of – bank transfers. Hyperinflation resulted in the drastic devaluation of the national currency, causing public sector monthly salaries to drop from the equivalent of \$150–\$500 in 2015 to \$1-\$10 in 2020, while growing impoverishment affected almost all strata of society. In 2018/19, the Government introduced new economic policies that lifted price controls and allowed the private sector to re-enter the economy.¹³

With the tightening of sanctions from 2017 the positive developments and multiple reforms have been undermined and the State's capacity to maintain infrastructure and continue the implementation of social programmes has been challenged. Today, the country faces challenges in industry, delivery of essential public services including electricity, water, fuel, gas, food and medicine, while the country's assets frozen in the United States, the United Kingdom and European Union banks amount to \$6 billion. The financial resource could have been used for the purchase of goods and payments by public companies which is blocked at the moment.

Numerous members of the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities and public offices and citizens reported the refusal or reluctance of foreign banks to open, or allow them to keep, accounts, or to send transfers in or out of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; difficulties in obtaining visas and buying airplane tickets; the need to act through third-country agents, which increase costs and cause delays; and the need to pay

extra insurance costs has created an avalanche of challenges for the population. To address the economic and financial strangulation and the related growing over compliance, the Government adopted the Anti-Blockade Constitutional Law in October 2020.

Other Impacts

The strangulating sanctions have led to unprecedented migration figures. According to a UN report, giving reference various sources including the Venezuelan government, the record amount to 1.2 to 5.6 million people by May 2021.

The magnitude of migration numbers reflect a brain drain of the country, with state companies and public services losing 30-50% of staff, including “doctors, nurses, teachers, university professors, engineers, police officers, judges, technicians and many others.” This resulted “in internal disorganization, increased workloads for remaining staff, reduced services and a decline in their quality.”¹⁴

The United States Unilateral Sanctions Against the Islamic Republic of Iran

History

Duration: The United States of America has imposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979, and maintained and added new sanctions to the ones already in place in 2018, 2019, 2020.

Targets: The targets include thousands of individuals and entities in almost all sectors of the society including the health sector, food, exports, banking transactions and financial services and shipping sector. In other words, the whole population are targeted by multiple sanctions.

Alleged Reason: The unilateral sanctions were initially imposed following the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and were intensified afterwards. New sanctions were imposed on various allegations

including the activities of Iran nuclear facilities, following the United States unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which was a multilateral agreement signed between Iran and 5+1.



United Nations Stance: An at 28th session of the Human Rights Council, based on the resolution 27/21, the collective efforts of the sanctioned States translated to adoption of a Resolution that created the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCM)s on human rights. The mandate has been renewed by subsequent resolutions since the date. The Special Rapporteur has been reprimanding the negative impacts of UCMs on various social strata in the target countries, offering recommendations on sanction lifting specially during the pandemic while all her suggestions and calls seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

Impact on the Population Health Sector

In Iran, NGOs have been witness to the unending sufferings of the people who live under the sanctions of the United States. The scope of inhuman UCMs, imposed beyond the authority of the UN is so vast

that leads to widespread violations of all human rights of all people, including patients' access to treatment leading to serious violation of the right to life and the right to physical and mental health.

The alarming human rights repercussions of UCMs made a multitude of UN reports to interpret UCMs as “collective punishment”¹⁵, “de facto blockade”¹⁶ and “economic warfare”¹⁷ because the measures claim human lives as in armed conflicts. Some UN reports have criticized UCMs as “crimes against humanity”¹⁸ due to systematic deprivation

of target populations from access to essential services including food and medicine.

Sanctioned countries have referred to sanctions as “economic terrorism”¹⁹ “crimes against humanity”²⁰ and “genocide” considering the detrimental effects on civilian populations. Within the scope of the present publication three examples of the vulnerable

groups' right to health targeted by UCMs are presented:

Iran Chemical Weapon Victims

A group, systemically targeted by UCMs are the victims of chemical attacks during Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The chemical air raids affected about 400 thousand civilians and combats, one of the largest



populations of contemporary chemical weapon victims worldwide. Now, the United States secondary sanctions and the over compliance of pharmaceutical companies with sanctions due to fear of heavy financial penalties has led to scarcity of specific types of medicine, required by the victims of chemical weapons.

Children with Chronic Disease

The situation of EB children in Iran is another tangible example. The children suffer from a severe and life threatening rare skin condition, called epidermolysis bullosa (EB), which causes extremely painful wounds. The only effective treatment to relieve the life-long pain was the bandage produced by a Swedish company that decided to halt shipments to Iran in order to over-comply with U.S. sanctions. The decision harms the patients right to health, to be free from physical and psychological pain and the right to life. The case of EB children and their lack of access to effective treatment was raised by a group of UN experts on Oct, 19th, 2021 who criticized the situation.

The health challenges threaten the lives of a plethora of other patients



The alarming human rights repercussions of UCMs made a multitude of UN reports to interpret UCMs as “collective punishment”¹⁵, “de facto blockade”¹⁶ and “economic warfare”¹⁷ “because the measures claim human lives as in armed conflicts

especially children who require chronic medications and treatments for physical complications including cancer, thalassemia, MS etc. The patients confront constrained access to medicine because of scarcity and expensiveness resulted by sanctions imposed on interbank transactions that impede all imports including the purchase and shipping of humanitarian items.

The Aged

The elderly people living under UCMs consisted the other vulnerable group who paid the price of sanctions with their lives during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to delayed or banned delivery of quality medicine and vaccine because of the sanctions imposed on inter-bank systems.

The Right to Education

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been targeted by the United States unilateral coercive measures (UCM)s that violate people's economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education in various ways.

Increased cost of education: The adverse impact of UCMs on the target economies lead to an increase in the cost of all basic services including education. The increasing cost coupled with decreasing income seriously limit the quality and access to education for all, including the children's access to even free education – because they are not able to afford the requirements including clothes, books, stationary etc. – as well as the adult's access to higher education.

Students abroad: The students of target countries bear the brunt of UCMs while studying abroad. Sanctions on interbank messaging systems, prevent any financial transfer between the target country and all other states making it almost impossible for foreign students to pay their education fees. On the other hand, a drop in the value of currency in the target countries makes it more difficult for students to afford the university fees. The new impediments facing students in foreign countries makes it impossible for some of them to continue their education abroad which is a serious violation of their right to education and a negative impact on their future life and career.

Blocking online education: The United States’ sanctions made provider of free online university courses such as “Coursera” to block online learning in sanctioned countries, including the Islamic Republic of Iran. The providers of massive open online courses started blocking access to their sites for users on sanction targeted countries. The online courses were launched to meet the goal of creating a world where people can learn without limits. However, the new polices of the United States will prevent the education websites from realizing their predetermined goals. In addition, sanctions deny online access to some universities and libraries, depriving students from access to the resources they need.



Poverty

Eradication of Extreme Poverty - as one of the Sustainable Development Goals - is seriously hampered by UCM. The measures nullify any attempts to end poverty and what is worst is that they create increasing poverty in the targeted societies. In addition, UCMs violate the fundamental human rights of civilians, specifically the right to development. In fact, UCMs act against the universal values set by the United Nations to protect human rights and improve the living conditions of civilians in targeted developing countries.

In the case of extreme poverty, UCMs that aim at undermining financial stability, increasingly push more people below the poverty line in targeted countries, making the population suffer from the adverse struggle with financial issues. UCMs increase income inequality, widen the poverty gap and make the deprived sections of the population feel the most impact. The uneven distribution of income among the population leads to the inability of the poor to invest in education and their low health levels, among other needs. By limiting access of the deprived section of population to basic services including health and education, UCMs violate the fundamental right to life, the right to health and the right to education. Also, limited access to basic services lead to social discrimination and exclusion as well as the lack of participation in social life for the poor and pushes them to the margins of society more than ever. Various social groups bear disproportionate burden of poverty with the most deprived bearing the heaviest.

Other Impacts

The Right to Development

Unilateral Measures move in the opposite direction of all development efforts made by the United Nations and the developing States and can be considered as counter-development measures. Economic sanctions have a negative impact on all aspects of development enumerated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including economic growth, industry improvement, construction and maintenance of civilian infrastructures, education and wellbeing.

Final Word

All in all, sanctions disagree with the values of the international community and international standards set by the United Nations considered as universal goals. They violate fundamental human rights and enforce an increasing number of people into an insidious challenge with wide scoped violation of all economic social and cultural rights including the right to development and even the right to life.

The organization for defending victims of violence and Fundalatin have been trying to raise awareness on the destructive impact of UCMs for the past few years, hoping to speak out for the rights of people adversely affected by UCMs in targeted countries.

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 2. e.g., A/RES/47/19;
 3. On June 2021, A total of 184 countries voted in favour of a resolution to demand the end of the US economic blockade on Cuba, for the 29th year in a row, with the United States and Israel voting against; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1094612>.
 4. International sanctions during the Venezuelan crisis; available at: <https://yun.ir/n5avxc>
 5. Lancet, 2019 Mar 23;393(10177):1254-1260. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30344-7. Epub 2019 Mar 11.
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 7. <http://cepr.net/publications/reports/economic-sanctions-as-collective-punishment-the-case-of-venezuela>
 8. See, for example, <https://insoencovi.ucab.edu.ve/indicador-pobreza/>
 9. See <https://yun.ir/m9xo2g>
 10. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000114546.pdf>
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