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# United States Senate

May 15, 2020

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The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer:

As you work to craft future coronavirus relief packages, I urge you to include in them legislation I have introduced that addresses pandemic-related international priorities. These include (1) protecting American citizens abroad, (2) promoting the protection of human rights during the pandemic, (3) ensuring that U.S. sanctions do not hinder the delivery of lifesaving aid, and (4) utilizing the skills of returned Peace Corps volunteers and others who the pandemic has forced to return home. I also ask that you ensure there is adequate funding for the State Department, USAID, and international institutions to respond to the unprecedented challenges they face in the current fiscal year and beyond.

First, as the pandemic continues, it is essential that we strengthen the State Department's ability to protect U.S. citizens and nationals overseas. Border closures and other steps that countries have taken to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus have impacted U.S. citizens and nationals abroad. Thousands of Americans have found themselves stuck overseas, needing information and services from U.S. embassies and consulates, including assistance with repatriation. This surge in demand for help has required a large-scale response from the State Department at the same time its officials are navigating teleworking and striving to keep embassy employees safe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abigail Williams et al., *50,000 U.S. citizens still stuck overseas because of coronavirus*, NBC News (Mar. 25, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/50-000-u-s-citizens-still-stuck-overseas-because-coronavirus-n1169081>.

The *Expanding Vital American Citizen Services Overseas (EVACS) Act* will expedite American Citizen Services at U.S. embassies, consulates, and missions worldwide.<sup>2</sup> These crucial services include emergency passports; Consular Reports of Birth Abroad; virtual or in-person welfare visits of U.S. citizens who are imprisoned or hospitalized; emergency financial assistance; and repatriation of U.S. citizens and nationals. The legislation waives travel expenses the State Department pays for Americans to return home, encourages additional staffing to improve constituent services, and helps ensure State Department employees have access to personal protective equipment.

Second, as nations around the globe mobilize against the coronavirus, we must promote and protect international human rights. Sadly, it appears that many foreign leaders see the spread of COVID-19 as an opportunity to consolidate power, silence dissent, and increase invasive surveillance measures without oversight or accountability.<sup>3</sup> And it is vulnerable and marginalized populations abroad who are often at greatest risk when human rights are curtailed.<sup>4</sup> As one of the lead drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United States has a long history of promoting the protection of human rights around the world. The *Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act* requires the State Department and USAID to institute reporting, authorize programming, and engage in strategic planning that will help ensure the protection of internationally recognized human rights during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Third, because continuing COVID-19 outbreaks abroad will endanger our recovery at home, we must also lead a successful global response — one that ensures the adequate flow of humanitarian assistance to countries that need it most. Countries targeted by U.S. and multilateral sanctions tend to suffer from severe deficiencies in public health infrastructure. In North Korea, for example, COVID-19 is exacerbating challenges related to deadly infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Roughly 10 million people in North Korea are in urgent need of food assistance, and more than 40 percent of its citizens are undernourished.<sup>6</sup> The *Enhancing North Korea Humanitarian Assistance Act* would streamline the delivery of lifesaving aid that nongovernmental organizations provide to the people of North Korea, by ensuring that the Treasury Department, the State Department, and the UN's North Korea

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<sup>2</sup> Press Release, Senator Ed Markey, Senator Markey and Rep. Castro Announce Legislation to Expand Protections for American Citizens Overseas during Coronavirus Pandemic (Apr. 17, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Doug Rutzen & Nikhil Dutta, *Pandemics and Human Rights*, Just Security (Mar. 12, 2020), <https://www.justsecurity.org/69141/pandemics-and-human-rights/>

<sup>4</sup> Sara Saidi, *Internet censorship and shutdowns are becoming an increasingly complex and widespread tool for repression*, Equal Times, (May 12, 2020), [https://www.equaltimes.org/internet-censorship-and-shutdowns?lang=en#.Xr2P\\_mhKjD4](https://www.equaltimes.org/internet-censorship-and-shutdowns?lang=en#.Xr2P_mhKjD4).

<sup>5</sup> Press Release, Senator Ed Markey, Bipartisan, Bicameral Group of Lawmakers Introduces Legislation to Counter Human Rights Abuses Worldwide Amidst Coronavirus Pandemic (May 7, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Stone Fish, *North Koreans are Starving. Shouldn't we do something?*, NY Times, (May 6, 2020), [https://www.equaltimes.org/internet-censorship-and-shutdowns?lang=en#.Xr2P\\_mhKjD4](https://www.equaltimes.org/internet-censorship-and-shutdowns?lang=en#.Xr2P_mhKjD4).

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sanctions committee faithfully implement exemptions for trade in food and medicine.<sup>7</sup> I have also joined my colleagues in urging the Trump administration to take practical steps to ensure that U.S. sanctions on countries such as Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea do not needlessly hinder lifesaving assistance to the people of those countries, and urge inclusion of language to that effect.

Finally, I ask that you take steps to engage evacuated Peace Corps volunteers, U.S. Fulbright Scholars, and other Americans the pandemic has impacted. There are myriad ways they can serve our country in this time of crisis. For example, we need a contract-tracing workforce to give us the confidence needed to safely return to work and to our schools. *The Undertaking National Initiatives to Tackle Epidemic (“UNITE Act”)* directs both the Corporation for National and Community Service, which manages the flagship AmeriCorps programs, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to prioritize the selection and hiring of these service-minded Americans, many of whom were forced to leave their posts and return home due to the pandemic. Here at home, they can apply the skills they developed — aiding vulnerable communities in their time of need and helping to slow the spread of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup>

I urge you to consider these important provisions as you continue to craft legislative responses to the coronavirus pandemic. As we endure the many global challenges COVID-19 has caused, we must lead the fight, protect our citizens, and offer our assistance to those suffering around the world.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Edward J. Markey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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<sup>7</sup> Press Release, Senator Ed Markey, Senator Markey and Rep. Levin to Introduce Legislation to Streamline North Korea Humanitarian Assistance (Apr. 13, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Press Release, Senator Ed Markey, Senators Markey and Van Hollen Introduce Legislation to Significantly Expand National Service, Fully Utilize Peace Corps in Response to Coronavirus Crisis (Apr. 13, 2020).