**The impact of unilateral sanctions on human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of the COVID-19 crisis**

**Submitted to:** UN Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures.

**Submitted by:** Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights (an organization in special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council).

**The case study**: The Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Preamble**

**Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights (Egypt)** condemns the continuing economic sanctions imposed by the United States of America on Iran, which have crippled the Iranian government and undermined its ability to adequately respond to the mounting health consequences of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. **Maat** is deeply concerned about the rising burden on Iran’s debilitated health-care system, due to the broad US economic sanctions which have in severe international banking restrictions, in conjunction with the massive restriction on human freedom and rights, which are already threatened under normal circumstances by the Iranian authorities, especially in light of the COVID-19 crisis, when freedoms are further restricted. The suffering and misery of Iranian prisoners, who are locked up in overcrowding prisons without access to all means of services and health care, is compounded by the Trump administration wrong and callous decision to deprive the Iranians of access to the critical medical resources they urgently need.

Although "Maat for Peace" is deeply concerned about the human rights file in the Iranian Republic, it strongly decries the Iranian authorities' use of lethal force and violence against peaceful demonstrators, as well as arrests, enforced disappearances, severe torture, rampant corruption in the state, and standard execution operations. All this, however, did not prevent it from calling for the right of the Iranian people to obtain the necessary health care. **Maat** believes that Trump’s administration mounting sanctions will inevitably undermine the right to health of individuals in Iran. Therefore, **Maat** calls on the US administration to release a clear general license authorizing specific medical goods and equipment to facilitate international relief efforts and to issue a 90-day waiver of sectoral sanctions that impede a rapid humanitarian response, among other efforts. This in conjunction with Maat’s call on the Iranian government to use all possible means, from local resources to negotiations with other countries, to ensure that all residents have access to urgent medical supplies and medicines.

**Maat** wishes to ensure that the very act of imposing coercive unilateral sanctions in normal circumstances is very disturbing, and it constrains the state’s economic, political and social advancement, not to mention its continuation and even its increase in emergency situations, such is the case for Iran, which is a grave violation of international law. As under international law, any country or coalition of countries implementing economic sanctions must take into account the impact of their sanctions on the human rights of the affected population, especially in terms of their access to basic commodities, including medicines and food. **Maat**, therefore, submits this report to guide the Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures, and to clarify the impact of unilateral sanctions on Iran’s debilitated economy, and its ability to respond to emergencies and protect human rights, especially the most vulnerable groups of the Iranian people, amid the Coronavirus crisis.

**The impact of US sanctions on the Iranians human rights during the COVID-19 outbreak**

The burden on the country’s debilitated health care system has dramatically increased, the broad US economic sanctions resulting in severe international banking restrictions have drastically constrained the ability of the country to finance humanitarian imports, including medicines and medical equipment. And all is compounded by the unfortunate fact that Iranians are saddled with a brutal, self-serving government that refuses to even release wrongfully detained people in crowded prisons despite the risk of coronavirus, as well as the ambiguity and lack of transparency about the Iranian economy. It is worth noting that the Trump administration has refused to ease or remove the economic sanctions imposed on Iran amid the COVID-19 outbreak. The situation worsened as the United States expanded its severe sanctions to prevent the Islamic Republic from purchasing medical equipment.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the same context, Iran’s efforts to fight COVID-19 pandemic have been severely hampered by US sanctions, and the Iranian patients pay the price of this more than others. In addition to the fact that the United States hampers all the efforts to fight the emerging Coronavirus, as it have directly impacted families’ purchasing power, depriving them of access to the critical medical resources, and severely violating the human rights of Iranians whose right are already violated by the Iranian authorities that use torture, repression, and standard executions as weapons against citizens. All this gave the Iranian authorities an excuse to justify their failure to address the novel Coronavirus pandemic, which is evidenced by the Iranian government's rejection of medical aid offered by "Doctors Without Borders" to help people infected. Moreover, the authorities have deliberately put inmates contracting the virus with prisoners of conscious, while human rights organizations have drawn the attention to how Tehran compound the sufferings when it comes to the state budget.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In a related context, the Iranian government allocates huge sums of money to support the Mustafa University, which is globally accused of terrorism-related charges, while invoking US sanctions when it comes to discussing its strategy to fight the Coronavirus, which makes the Iranian leadership have a large share of responsibility of what is happening in the country now, and it must pointed out that the Iranian authorities are committed to taking more measures to reform the health system, instead of spending billions in support of terrorism in the region. It is important that the government works to release the wrongfully detained people in over-crowded poorly-equipped prisons, which must have become much worse during the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus. As human rights reports indicate an increase in cases of human rights violations in Iran's most notorious prisons in light of the outbreak of the Coronavirus, as well as increasing arrests of activists, human rights defenders, Politicians, and those involved in peaceful protests, and its use of the epidemic as a pretext to crackdown opposition, exercise media misinformation, prevent the free flow of information, and use security forces to restrict the spread of news and related information. To conclude, the outbreak of the virus in Iran is the responsibility of both the Iranian authorities and the US coercive sanctions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Based on the above, **Maat** calls on the Iranian government to take advantage of all available resources to curb the outbreak of the epidemic in a manner that respects human rights, and reduces the damages to the health and well-being of all residents in the country. The Iranian government is obligated to secure the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, which means adopting all necessary measures to curb the outbreak of the pandemic and mitigate the economic impacts of the virus that affect some of the already marginalized groups in the Iranian society, such as Afghan immigrants, persons with disabilities, refugees, and low-paid workers in low-income families. **Maat**, therefore, urges the Iranian government to work on developing some plans in order to protect these workers affected by the virus, as to take the minimal measures to ensure that everyone continues to have access to adequate level of affordable food, water, and other elements that guarantee them a decent standard of living.

**International humanitarian efforts - despite US sanctions - to promote the Iranian fight against the Coronavirus**

Although punitive measures imposed by the US administration on the Islamic Republic of Iran cripple the state’s ability to cope with the outbreak of the novel COVID-19, the international community has taken several measures that will rapidly enhance the ability of the Islamic Republic of Iran to resist the pandemic. Additionally, the WHO, in the framework of these promotional measures, provided medical supplies and equipment to the Islamic Republic of Iran as part of its efforts to contain and combat the emerging Coronavirus, all with the support of the United Arab Emirates, as an aircraft of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Air Force, reportedly transported on the third of March 2020, medical supplies weighing 7.7 from the International Humanitarian City in Dubai to the Islamic Republic of Iran.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In a related context, Dubai’s International Humanitarian City has packed and shipped supplies that contain hundreds of thousands of gloves, surgical masks and relevant items that will help about 15,000 people and health care workers in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The shipment includes laboratory diagnostic tools that are used in examining thousands of people, and will support efforts to control the virus. In its second patch, the United Arab Emirates has sent another two aid planes carrying medical supplies and relief equipment to Iran to support the latter’s efforts to combat the spread of the coronavirus. The two aid aircrafts, which took off from Abu Dhabi, contained over 32 metric tons of supplies, including boxes filled with thousands of pairs of gloves, surgical masks, and protective equipment, within the framework of the country’s efforts to provide life-saving assistance to Arab countries affected by the coronavirus.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the same context, the European Union has sent more than €20 million in humanitarian aid to Iran, according to the Federation's vision that Iran is the Middle Eastern nation worst hit by the coronavirus. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, pointed out that the decision to support Iran is due to its critical situation, which caused by the US sanctions that prevent it from obtaining an income by selling its own oil, and he emphasized that the human trade and goods that can be delivered to these countries on the human level, i.e. agricultural food, medicines, and medical supplies, are not included in the US sanctions.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Recommendations**

Motivated by the key role played by civil society organizations in raising awareness among peoples of their full rights, and to activate its role as a human rights organization seeking to enhance the human rights approach and use its mechanisms to support the pillars of democracy in the Middle East and the world at large, **Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights** recommends the American government to ensure providing an explanation to the financial sanctions and unilateral coercive measures imposed on some countries, such as Iran, clearly and publicly, in order to authorize the shipment of any supplies needed by the Iranian people to protect themselves from the Coronavirus, and **Maat** also recommends Iran's prison authorities to facilitate temporary release of all eligible prisoners and the unconditional release of people detained for peaceful dissent, due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

**Maat** also calls on the European Union to provide more humanitarian aid, medical assistance and preventive supplies for all countries worst affected by the outbreak of the Coronavirus, especially Iran that faces several obstacles, the first of which is the sanctions imposed by the US administration that hamper its efforts to fight the new Coronavirus epidemic, "COVID-19".

1. U.S. sanctions 'severely hamper' Iran coronavirus fight, Rouhani says, Reuuters, 14 March 2020. <https://cutt.us/jl0Rl> v [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. كورونا يفتك بالإيرانيين.. والنظام يرفض المساعدات الدولية ويتحجج بالعقوبات، الحرة، 27 مارس 2020. <https://cutt.us/L1gnv> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. مرصد حقوق الإنسان فى إيران يؤكد تشديد الضغوط القضائية والامنية رغم جائحة كورونا، ايرانينال، 1 يونيو 2020. <https://cutt.us/edTda> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. الصحة العالمية تساعد إيران لاحتواء كورونا، عالم رقمى، 3 مارس 2020. <https://cutt.us/SOYaY> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. الجهود الإنسانية فى التعامل مع تفشى فيروس كورونا، البوابة الرسمية لدولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة، إيران. <https://cutt.us/0kA5y> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. الاتحاد الأوروبي يدعم إيران بأكثر من 21 مليون دولار لمواجهة كورونا، سى ان ان عربى، 24 مارس 2020. <https://cutt.us/ZN78N> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)