May 11, 2020

Dear Chairwoman Lowey, Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Rogers, and Ranking Member Leahy:

We write to urge you to honor our nation’s financial obligations to the United Nations by supporting funding for the organization’s peacekeeping, human rights, humanitarian, development, and global health work in Fiscal Year 2021. As organizations that work in a variety of fields relevant to U.S. foreign policy, we firmly believe that American investments in the UN are critical to addressing global challenges in a cost-effective manner.

Right now, the world is facing a deadly crisis that highlights the need for strong and collective multilateral action: the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, the UN system is playing a leading role in the global response. The World Health Organization (WHO) is on the ground in 149 countries working to help public health authorities contain the virus. This includes supporting efforts to improve early detection and contact tracing systems in countries with weak health systems; carrying out awareness raising activities to communicate accurate and timely information; coordinating research and innovation efforts to advance drugs, vaccines and diagnostics, and helping countries scale-up testing and access essential personal protective equipment.

In addition, UN peacekeeping missions are using patrols to educate on mitigation measures and pre-positioning testing kits, masks, and protective suits in vulnerable areas. Overall, the thirteen peacekeeping missions are deployed to conflict zones across three continents, protecting civilians from violence, promoting peaceful transitions of power, and separating warring factions, activities taken on even more prominence in the wake of COVID-19.

Other UN agencies are bringing their own equities to the global fight against the novel coronavirus as well. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has published specific guidance calling for government responses that respect “human rights across the spectrum, including economic and social rights, civil and political rights,” as well as protecting rights for the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is scaling up assistance to refugee camps around the world, places that are uniquely vulnerable to the spread of diseases like COVID-19. UNICEF is supporting health for children and mothers, access to vaccines and immunization, access to clean water and hygiene products, and education. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) supports frontline health care workers and is
strengthening health systems to ensure reproductive and maternal health care and protection from gender-based violence remains accessible. The World Food Program (WFP) has established an air hub in Ethiopia to distribute vital medical supplies across Africa on behalf of the larger humanitarian community. In addition, in Africa, the existing work of many of these UN agencies is especially vital, as the continent’s relatively weak health systems are already overstretched by the high burden of other infectious diseases. For example, the vast majority of global deaths from HIV, measles, and malaria and one in four deaths from tuberculosis are in Africa; we cannot curtail ongoing mitigation efforts or the ramifications of COVID-19 will be even more destructive.

None of these activities would be possible without financial support from the United States. For this reason, we are extremely concerned about mounting budgetary shortfalls that the UN is facing on a number of fronts. On April 1st, the UN announced that it is facing a massive liquidity crisis due to the failure of member states, particularly the U.S., to pay its assessments on-time and in-full. The UN regular budget reportedly ended 2019 with $711 million in member state arrears, of which the U.S. owes $486 million. This, combined with delays in member state payments of the 2020 assessment, has led the UN to institute counter-productive measures that reduce spending in the short-term but will require far larger expenditures in the long-term. The financial situation is also dire for UN peacekeeping operations.

Since FY’17, Congress and the Administration have enforced an arbitrary 25% cap on U.S. contributions to UN peacekeeping, causing nearly $1 billion in arrears. There have also been unexplained delays in the disbursement of assessed funding to key UN agencies by the Administration, including the World Health and Food & Agriculture Organizations, even though these funds have already been appropriated by Congress. With respect to WHO, while the agency has welcomed accountability when the crisis abates - as they have done following past international health emergencies – further delays or holds on funding amidst an unprecedented global crisis would be disastrous, given its central role in helping developing countries battle the outbreak and in disseminating information about the virus.

Addressing these challenges requires more U.S. engagement, not less, and that means, in part, meeting our financial commitments to the UN and UN agencies. We therefore ask that, as you craft FY’21 State/Foreign Operations appropriations legislation, you support funding levels for three key UN-related accounts. Specifically, we hope that you will provide $2.616 billion for the Contributions for International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA) account, an amount that will allow us to pay our FY’21 peacekeeping dues at the full assessed rate and pay back arrears. We also request the inclusion of bill language waiving the statutory 25% cap. With regards to other parts of the UN budget, we recommend at least $1.527 billion for the Contributions to International Organizations (CIO) account, and $646.5 million for the International Organizations and Programs (IO&P) account. In addition, in any potential COVID-19 emergency supplemental appropriations bill, we urge you to support a robust figure for the International Affairs Budget and as part of that, a proportionate U.S. share of the UN global emergency humanitarian appeal to help protect those people in the most vulnerable countries. If we leave coronavirus to spread freely in vulnerable settings, we would be placing millions at high risk, whole regions will be tipped into chaos and the virus will have the opportunity to circle back around the globe.

Thank you for your leadership and longstanding support for U.S. international affairs programs. We look forward to working with you to ensure strong support for multilateral diplomacy in the coming fiscal year.

Sincerely,