

SANCTIONS ARE A CRIME

Swiftly moves the coronavirus disease (Covid-19), dashing across continents, skipping over oceans, terrifying populations in every country. The numbers of those infected rise, as do the numbers of those who have died. Hands are being washed, tests are being done, and ‘social distance’ has become a new phrase. It is unclear how devastating this pandemic will be. In the midst of a pandemic, one would expect that all countries would collaborate in every way to mitigate the spread of the virus and its impact on human society. One would expect that a humanitarian crisis of this magnitude would provide the opportunity to suspend or end all inhumane economic sanctions and political blockades against certain countries. The main point here is this : Was this not the time for the imperialist bloc, led by the United States of America, to have ended the sanctions against Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, and a series of other countries?

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza told Paola Estrada and me recently that the ‘illegal and unilateral coercive measures that the United States has imposed on Venezuela are a form of collective punishment’. The use of the phrase ‘collective punishment’ is significant; under the 1949 Geneva Conventions, any policy that inflicts damage on an entire population is a war crime. The US policy, Arreaza told us, has ‘resulted in difficulties for the timely acquisition of medicines’. On paper, the unilateral US sanctions say that medical supplies are exempt. But this is an illusion. Neither Venezuela nor Iran can easily buy medical supplies, nor can they easily transport them into their countries, nor can they use them in their largely public-sector health systems. The embargo against these countries – in the time of Covid-19 – was not only a war crime by the standards of the Geneva Conventions (1949) but was a crime against humanity as defined by the United Nations’s International Law Commission (1947).

In 2017, US President Donald Trump enacted tight restrictions on Venezuela’s ability to access financial markets; two years later, the US government blacklisted Venezuela’s central bank and put a general embargo against Venezuelan state institutions. If any firm trades with Venezuela’s public sector, it could face secondary sanctions. The US Congress passed the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2017, which tightened sanctions against Iran, Russia and North Korea. The next year, Trump imposed a raft of new sanctions against Tehran that suffocated Iran’s economy. Once more, lack of access to the world banking system and threats to companies that traded with Iran made it almost impossible for Iran to do business with the world. In particular, the US government made it clear that any business with the public sector of Iran and Venezuela was forbidden. The health infrastructure that provides for the mass of the populations in both Iran and Venezuela is run by the state, which means it faces disproportionate difficulty in accessing equipment and supplies, including testing kits and medicines.

Arreaza told us that his government had quickly become alert to the dangers of Covid-19 with a health infrastructure that had been affected by the sanctions. ‘We are breaking the blockade,’ Arreaza said, ‘through the World Health Organization, through which we have obtained medicine and the tests to detect the illness.’ The WHO, despite its own crisis of funds, began to play a key role in both Venezuela and Iran. Nonetheless, the WHO faced its own challenges with sanctions, particularly when it comes to transportation. These harsh sanctions forced transportation companies to reconsider servicing both Iran and Venezuela. Some airlines stopped flying there; many shipping companies decided not to anger Washington. When the

WHO tried to get testing kits for Covid-19 from the United Arab Emirates into Iran, it faced difficulty – as the WHO’s Christoph Hamelmann put it – ‘due to flight restrictions’; the UAE sent the equipment via a military transport plane.

Likewise, Arreaza told us, Venezuela has ‘received solidarity from governments of countries such as China and Cuba’. This is a key issue. China, despite its own challenges from Covid-19, had begun to supply testing kits and medical equipment to Iran and to Venezuela; it was China’s vigorous reaction to the virus that has now slowed down its spread within China itself. In late February, a team from the Red Cross Society of China arrived in Tehran to exchange information with the Iranian Red Cross and with WHO officials; China also donated testing kits and supplies. The sanctions, Chinese officials told us, should be of no consequence during a humanitarian crisis such as this; they are not going to honour them. Meanwhile, the Iranians developed an app to help their population during the Covid-19 outbreak; Google decided to remove it from its app store, a consequence of the US sanctions.

Yolimar Mejías Escorcha, an industrial engineer, told us that the sanctions regime has put a lot of pressure on everyday life in Venezuela. She says that the government ‘continues to make an effort to ensure that people who most need it get health care, education, and food’. The opposition has tried to say that the crisis is a consequence of the government’s inefficiency rather than a result of the imperialist blockade on Venezuela. In early March, a new campaign was launched in the country called ‘Sanctions Are a Crime’. She hoped that this campaign would explain clearly to people why there are shortages in her country – the sanctions being the core reason.

In 2019, a group of countries met at the United Nations in New York to discuss the US unilateral sanctions that violated the UN Charter. The intent was to work through the Non-Aligned Movement to create a formal group that would respond to these sanctions. Arreaza told us that Venezuela supports this initiative but also the declaration of principles drafted by Iran against unilateralism and the Russian formal complaint about denial of visas for officials to visit the UN building in New York. ‘We hope to resume meetings this year once the difficulties presented by Covid-19 are overcome,’ he said. They want to meet again, Arreaza said, to ‘advance joint, concrete actions’.

When the United States continues its embargoes against more than 50 countries – but mostly against Cuba, Iran and Venezuela – when there is a global pandemic afoot, what does this say about the nature of power and authority in our world? Sensitive people should be offended by such behaviour, its mean-spiritedness evident in the unnatural deaths that it provokes. That is why Iran took the case of US sanctions to the International Court of Justice, which ruled – in early March 2020 – that the United States must withdraw its harsh sanctions. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reacted in character : ‘I am surprised that the court failed to recognize its lack of jurisdiction,’ he said. No international body dare tell the United States what to do, even in a time of a global pandemic.

Information for press

This excerpt comes from the chapter, Sanctions are a Crime in *Washington Bullets* by Vijay Prashad. Please see the press release for further information on the title.