

Sen. Bob Menendez
528 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

April 17, 2020

Dear Senator Menendez:

We, the undersigned, represent a wide cross section of your constituents in New Jersey, including NGOs, peace groups, community and business leaders, academics, and the Korean American community. We write to express our deep disappointment in your March 31 letter to Secretaries Michael Pompeo and Steven Mnuchin, urging the Trump administration to “step up enforcement of U.S. and United Nations (U.N.) sanctions on the North Korean government.”

Your urgent appeal to reinvigorate sanctions against North Korea during a global health emergency is cruel and inhumane. While we struggle to prevent the spread of the coronavirus here at home, many of us fear for our relatives in the region, including long-divided family members in North Korea. There have been nearly 100,000 [confirmed cases](#) of COVID-19 in China and South Korea combined. By proximity, North Korea is extremely vulnerable to an outbreak due to its severely crippled health care system as a result of the U.S.-led global sanctions regime.

Despite your note to ensure that humanitarian aid can reach the North Korean people, we know that, in practice, life-saving humanitarian assistance is often not able to reach those who need it most in a timely manner because international financial institutions refuse to facilitate the transfer of funds needed to cover medical and operating expenses. This is a [direct result](#) of the increasingly harsh sanctions that you seek to tighten.

Insisting on maximizing pressure against North Korea only ensures that millions of people remain critically vulnerable to a global pandemic. We implore you to heed the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, who [called](#) for an easing of sanctions against countries like North Korea:

“The majority of these states have frail or weak health systems. Progress in upholding human rights is essential to improve those systems – but obstacles to the import of vital medical supplies, including over-compliance with sanctions by banks, will create long-lasting harm to vulnerable communities. The populations in these countries are in no way responsible for the policies being targeted by sanctions, and to varying degrees have already been living in a precarious situation for prolonged periods.”

Right now, we need leadership that fosters international cooperation and peace rather than further entrenching division and conflict. We urge you to use your platform to

advance diplomacy and engagement with North Korea. Our collective health, security, and humanity depend on it.

Sincerely,

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