

Crimes against Humanity: US Sanctions Harm One Third of World's People

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The most insidious and pervasive form of modern warfare by Wall Street and the Pentagon, acting in coordination, is passing largely unnoticed and unchallenged. This calculated attack is rolling back decades of progress in health care, sanitation, housing, essential infrastructure and industrial development all around the world.

Almost every developing country attempting any level of social programs for its population is being targeted.

U.S. imperialism and its junior partners have refined economic strangulation into a devastating weapon. Sanctions in the hands of the dominant military and economic powers now cause more deaths than bombs or guns. This weapon is stunting the growth of millions of youth and driving desperate migrations, dislocating tens of millions.

'A crime against humanity'

Sanctions and economic blockades against Venezuela, Cuba and Iran are well known. But the devastating impacts of U.S. sanctions on occupied Palestine — or on already impoverished countries such as Mali, Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Kyrgyzstan, Fiji, Nicaragua and Laos — are not even on the radar screen of human rights groups.

Most sanctions are intentionally hidden; they don't generate even a line of news. Some sanctions are quickly passed after a sudden news article about an alleged atrocity. The civilians who will suffer have nothing to do with whatever crime the corporate media use as an excuse. What are never mentioned are the economic or political concessions the U.S. government or corporations are seeking.

Sanctions cannot be posed as an alternative to war. They are in fact the most brutal form of warfare, deliberately targeting the most defenseless civilians — youth, the elderly, sick and disabled people. In a period of human history when hunger and disease are scientifically solvable, depriving hundreds of millions from getting basic necessities is a crime against humanity.

International law and conventions, including the Geneva and Nuremberg Conventions, United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, explicitly prohibit the targeting of defenseless civilians, especially in times of war.

Sanctions draw condemnation

Modern industrial society is built on a fragile web of essential technology. If pumps and

sewage lines, elevators and generators can't function due to lack of simple spare parts, entire cities can be overwhelmed by swamps. If farmers are denied seed, fertilizer, field equipment and storage facilities, and if food, medicine and essential equipment are deliberately denied, an entire country is at risk.

The Venezuelan ambassador to the United Nations, Samuel Moncada, spoke to the XVIII Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Baku, Azerbaijan, Oct. 26. Addressing the 120 countries represented, he denounced the imposition of arbitrary measures, called "sanctions" by the U.S., as "economic terrorism which affects a third of humanity with more than 8,000 measures in 39 countries."

This terrorism, he said, constitutes a "threat to the entire system of international relations and is the greatest violation of human rights in the world." (tinyurl.com/uwl99r)

The Group of 77 and China, an international body based at the U.N. and representing 134 developing countries, called upon "the international community to condemn and reject the imposition of the use of such measures as a means of political and economic coercion against developing countries."

The Group explained:

"The criminal, anti-human policy of targeting defenseless populations, which is in clear violation of United Nations Charter and international law, has now become the new weapon of choice for these powerful states since they are faced with strong opposition from the majority of their own population to the endless wars of occupation that they are already involved in."

The power of banks

The mechanism and the ability of one country or one vote to destroy a country on the other side of the world are not well understood.

International capital uses the dollar system. All international transactions go through U.S. banks. These banks are in a position to block money transfers for the smallest transaction and to confiscate billions of dollars held by targeted governments and individuals. They are also in a position to demand that every other bank accept sudden restrictions imposed from Washington or face sanctions themselves.

This is similar to how the U.S. Navy can claim the authority to intercept ships and interrupt trade anywhere, or the U.S. Army can target people with drones and invade countries without even asking for a declaration of war.

Sometimes a corporate media outlet, a U.S.-funded "human rights" group or a financial institution issues charges, often unsubstantiated, of human rights violations, or political repression, drug trafficking, terrorist funding, money laundering, cyber-security infractions, corruption or non-compliance with an international financial institution. These charges become the opening wedge for a demand for sanctions as punishment.

Sanctions can be imposed through a U.S. Congressional resolution or Presidential

declaration or be authorized by a U.S. government agency, such as the departments of the Treasury, Commerce, State or Defense. The U.S. might apply pressure to get support from the European Union, the U.N. Security Council or one of countless U.S.-established regional security organizations, such as the Organization of American States.

A U.S. corporate body that wants a more favorable trade deal is able to influence numerous agencies or politicians to act on its behalf. Deep-state secret agencies, military contractors, nongovernmental organizations funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, and numerous corporate-funded foundations maneuver to create economic dislocation and pressure resource-rich countries.

Even sanctions that appear mild and limited can have a devastating impact. U.S. officials will claim that some sanctions are only military sanctions, needed to block weapons sales. But under the category of possible “dual use,” the bans include chlorine needed to purify water, pesticides, fertilizers, medical equipment, simple batteries and spare parts of any kind.

Another subterfuge is sanctions that supposedly apply only to government officials or specific agencies. But in fact any and every transaction they carry out can be blocked while endless inquiries are held. Anonymous bank officials can freeze all transactions in progress and scrutinize all accounts a country holds. Any form of sanctions, even against individuals, raises the cost and risk level for credit and loans.

There are more than 6,300 names on the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List of individuals sanctioned by the Office of Foreign Assets Control at the U.S. Treasury Department.

The OFAC describes its role this way:

“OFAC administers a number of different sanctions programs. The sanctions can be either comprehensive or selective, using the blocking of assets and trade restrictions to accomplish foreign policy and national security goals.”

There is also a Financial Action Task Force list and an International Traffic in Arms Regulations list.

The sanctions weapon has become so extensive that there is now a whole body of law to guide U.S. corporations and banks in navigating sales, credit and loans. It is intended to be opaque, murky and open to interpretation, payoffs and subterfuge. There seems to be no single online site that lists all the different countries and individuals under U.S. sanctions.

Once a country is sanctioned, it must then “negotiate” with various U.S. agencies that demand austerity measures, elections that meet Western approval, cuts in social programs, and other political and economic concessions to get sanctions lifted.

Sanctions are an essential part of U.S. regime change operations, designed in the most cynical way to exact maximum human cost. Sudden hyperinflation, economic disruption and unexpected shortages are then hypocritically blamed on the government in office in the sanctioned country. Officials are labeled inept or corrupt.

Agencies carefully monitor the internal crisis they are creating to determine the optimum

time to impose regime change or manufacture a color revolution. The State Department and U.S. covert agencies fund numerous NGOs and social organizations that instigate dissent. These tactics have been used in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Iran, Syria, Libya, Zimbabwe, Sudan and many other countries.

A weapon of imperialism in decline

Gone are the days of Marshall Plan-type promises of rebuilding, trade, loans and infrastructure development. They are not even offered in this period of capitalist decay. The sanctions weapon is now such a pervasive instrument that hardly a week goes by without new sanctions, even on past allies.

In October the U.S. threatened harsh sanctions on Turkey, a 70-year member of the U.S.-commanded NATO military alliance.

On Nov. 27, Trump suddenly announced, by presidential decree, harsher sanctions on Nicaragua, calling it a “National Security Threat.” He also declared Mexico a “terrorist” threat and refused to rule out military intervention. Both countries have democratically elected governments.

Other sanctions sail through the U.S. Congress without a roll call vote — just a cheer and a unanimous voice vote, such as the sanctions on Hong Kong in support of U.S.-funded protests.

Why Wall Street can't be sanctioned

Is there any possibility that the U.S. could be sanctioned for its endless wars under the same provisions by which it has asserted the right to wreak havoc on other countries?

The Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, in November 2017 asked the Hague-based ICC to open formal investigations of war crimes committed by the Taliban, the Haqqani network, Afghan forces, and the U.S. military and the CIA.

The very idea of the U.S. being charged with war crimes led then White House National Security Advisor John Bolton to threaten judges and other ICC officials with arrest and sanction if they even considered any charge against U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

“If the court comes after us, Israel or other U.S. allies, we will not sit quietly,” Bolton said. He noted that the U.S. “is prepared to slap financial sanctions and criminal charges on officials of the court if they proceed against any U.S. personnel. ... We will ban its judges and prosecutors from entering the United States. We will sanction their funds in the U.S. financial system, and we will prosecute them in the U.S. criminal system. ... We will do the same for any company or state that assists an ICC investigation of Americans.” (The Guardian, Sept. 10, 2018)

Bolton also cited a recent move by Palestinian leaders to have Israeli officials prosecuted at the ICC for human rights violations. The ICC judges got the message. They ruled that despite “a reasonable basis” to consider war crimes committed in Afghanistan, there was little chance of a successful prosecution. An investigation “would not serve the interests of justice.”

Chief Prosecutor Bensouda, for proposing an even-handed inquiry, had her U.S. visa revoked by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Sanctions are a weapon in the capitalist world order used by the most powerful countries against those that are weaker and developing. One hundred years ago, in 1919, President Woodrow Wilson advocated sanctions as a quiet but lethal weapon that exerts pressure no nation in the modern world can withstand.

Sanctions demonstrate how capitalist laws protect the right of eight multibillionaires to own more than the population of half the world.

U.N. sanctions demanded by Washington

The U.S., with the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet and 800 military bases, claims — while engaged in wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya — that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Islamic Republic of Iran are the greatest threats to world peace.

In the U.N. Security Council, the U.S. succeeded in winning harsh new sanctions against Iran and the DPRK by threatening, on the eve of “war games,” that the U.S. would escalate hostilities to an open military attack.

This threat proved sufficient to get other Security Council members to fall in line and either vote for sanctions or abstain.

These strong-arm tactics have succeeded again and again. During the Korean War, when the U.S. military was saturation-bombing Korea, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Warren Austin held up a submachine gun in the Security Council to demand expanded authority in the war from that body.

Throughout the 1990s the U.S. government used sanctions on Iraq as a horrendous social experiment to calculate how to drastically lower caloric intake, destroy crop output and ruin water purification. The impact of these sanctions were widely publicized — as a threat to other countries.

Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, when asked about the half a million children who died as a result of U.S. sanctions on Iraq, replied, “We think the price is worth it.”

The sanctions imposed by the U.S. against Iran are book-length, spanning 40 years since the Iranian Revolution. The blockade and sanctions on Cuba have continued for 60 years.

Sanctions Kill campaign

It is an enormous political challenge to break the media silence and expose this crime. We need to put a human face on the suffering.

Targeted countries cannot be left to struggle by themselves in isolation — there must be full solidarity with their efforts. The sheer number of countries being starved into compliance via U.S.-imposed sanctions must be dragged into the light of day. And one step in challenging the injustice of capitalist property relations is to attack the criminal role of the banks.

The effort to rally world opinion against sanctions as a war crime is beginning with a call for International Days of Action Against Sanctions & Economic War on March 13-15, 2020. Its slogans are "Sanctions Kill! Sanctions Are War! End Sanctions Now!"

These coordinated international demonstrations are a crucial first step. Research and testimony; resolutions by unions, student groups, cultural workers and community organizations; social media campaigns; and bringing medical supplies and international relief to sanctioned countries can all play a role. Every kind of political campaign to expose the international crime of sanctions is a crucial contribution.

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