

April 18, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Afghanistan is in crisis. If immediate action is not taken to reverse the economic restrictions that have pushed the economy into free-fall, many experts believe that more Afghans may die in the coming year than were killed in 20 years of warfare.

According to the UNDP, Afghanistan is at risk of soon reaching “universal” levels of poverty.¹ The most recent projections place 23 million people — 55% of the country’s population — at a high level of acute food insecurity.² The World Health Organization estimates that 3.2 million children face acute malnutrition — one million of whom are at risk of death.³

Behind these appalling statistics lie grievous human stories. Across the country, Afghans were made to choose between buying food to eat and fuel to heat their homes against the harsh winter cold.⁴ In a recent Congressional hearing, International Rescue Committee President and CEO David Miliband shared reports of Afghans selling their organs, and others their own children, to avoid starvation.⁵ “Because of debt and hunger I was forced to sell my kidney,” one Afghan woman, Delaram Rahmati, told *The Guardian*, “I was forced to sell two of my daughters, an eight- and six-year-old.”⁶

This is a crisis of profound scale and tragedy. It is also, in large part, a crisis of choice.

Though many factors have contributed to Afghanistan’s economic disaster, including a collapse in outside salary support for hundreds of thousands of workers, drought, and the brutal rule of the Taliban, it is the US decision to prevent the country’s central bank — Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) — from accessing the roughly \$7 billion in foreign currency reserves held in the United States that has pushed a fragile economy over the edge. European financial institutions have similarly blocked the bank’s access to another \$2 billion of international reserves.

The central bank of Afghanistan, as is the case in other countries, plays a crucial role in stabilizing prices and exchange rates, preventing runaway inflation and financial crises, and, as the national lender of last resort, undergirding the country’s entire banking system. However, in order to perform these essential functions, DAB needs access to its hard currency international

¹<https://www.undp.org/press-releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-poverty-mid-2022-says-undp>

²https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Afghanistan_AcuteFoodInsec_2021Oct2022Mar_report.pdf

³<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/who-says-million-afghan-children-risk-dying-amid-acute-malnutrition-2021-11-12/>

⁴<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/08/afghanistan-winter-crisis/>

⁵<https://www.rescue.org/press-release/david-milibands-testimony-senate-foreign-relations-committee-subcommittee-afghanistan>

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/23/ive-already-sold-my-daughters-now-my-kidney-winter-in-afghanistan-s-slums>

reserves; without this access, it simply lacks the resources needed to maintain a functioning financial system and stable economy in Afghanistan.

According to Graeme Smith, an Afghanistan expert at the International Crisis Group, “The long and short of it is Western economic restrictions are creating an economic crisis in the country which is driving tens of millions Afghans into starvation.”⁷ As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres noted when the winter began, “Freezing temperatures and frozen assets are a lethal combination for the people of Afghanistan.”

We, the undersigned organizations, representing humanitarian, human rights, anti-war, veteran, faith-based, 9/11 victim, working class, and diaspora communities, urge the administration to make the full \$7 billion available to the central bank of Afghanistan. We also ask that you encourage other countries holding Afghan reserves to do the same.

Though we applaud the recent General License No. 20⁸ as well as US and multilateral efforts to provide much-needed humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people, neither of these can replace a functioning financial system. Without access to foreign currency reserves and international banking institutions, the country has no means by which to stabilize its currency, which is already leading to a liquidity crisis, enormous difficulties in purchasing essential imports, the depreciation of Afghanistan’s currency, and serious damage to the country’s banking system. Allowing DAB to access its reserves is a critical step to reestablishing the functioning of the Afghan banking system, halting the accelerating humanitarian crisis, and ultimately reversing Afghanistan’s economic collapse — indeed, it is a necessary one. As John Sifton, the Asia Advocacy Director for Human Rights Watch succinctly puts it: “A country needs a central bank.”⁹

Seizing nearly half of these assets for potential compensation in a lawsuit by the families of September 11th victims is particularly illogical and unjustified. We all want justice for the victims of the September 11th attacks. But, as recently stated by members of September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows who lost loved ones to the attacks: “The Afghan people are not responsible... The Afghan people are as much victims of 9/11 as we are.”¹⁰ “I can’t think of a worse betrayal of the people of Afghanistan.”¹¹

Nor is this policy justified by the terrible oppression experienced by Afghan women under Taliban rule. As Jamila Afghani, founder and president of the Afghan chapter of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, has said: “We are not supporting Afghan women by starving them.”¹²

⁷<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/20/opinion/afghanistan-starvation-biden.html?referringSource=articleShare>

⁸https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/ct_gl20.pdf

⁹<https://cepr.net/events/human-rights-watch-reacts-biden-moves-to-split-7-billion-in-frozen-afghan-funds/>

¹⁰https://twitter.com/MehdiHasanShow/status/1495934590074200065?s=20&t=dL_CJ7S3kxT6B1c9kq6ukA

¹¹https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/us/politics/taliban-afghanistan-911-families-frozen-funds.html?fbclid=IwAR2Rs1q0Syc8Uvyny_e3DSsDebmuJv3OUBYZJnyHb0E4E0ZK-oVC0loqf5MA

¹²<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/31/afghanistan-united-states-aid-women-taliban-humanitarian-crisis/>

We appreciate the challenges of attempting to help the people of Afghanistan without aiding the Taliban. However, these resources belong to the Afghan people, and to the extent that their access may inadvertently or indirectly benefit the Taliban government, this must be weighed against the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of Afghan civilians who will die if these assets are not returned to the central bank — all in punishment of a government that they did not choose. The starvation of millions of Afghans helps no one.

We urge you to act.

Sincerely,

9/11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows
Afghans for a Better Tomorrow
American Friends Service Committee
American Muslim Bar Association
Antiwar.com
Center for Economic and Policy Research
Charity & Security Network
Charter for Compassion
Church of the Brethren
CODEPINK
Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)
Demand Progress Education Fund
Democratic Socialists of America, International Committee
Engage
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Just Foreign Policy
Justice Is Global
The Libertarian Institute
MADRE
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mina's List
Muslim Public Affairs Council
National Council of Churches
National Iranian American Council
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
NH Peace Action
Oxfam America
Pax Christi US
Peace Action
PEACEWORKERS
Poligon Education Fund
Presbyterian Church (USA)

Project ANAR
Quincy Institute
Rethinking Foreign Policy
RootsAction.org
Unfreeze Afghanistan
United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries
The United Methodist Church — General Board of Church and Society
United for Peace and Justice
Veterans for Peace
War Prevention Initiative
Win Without War
Working Families Party
World BEYOND War

CC: Secretary Antony Blinken
Secretary Janet Yellen
Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Chairman Sherrod Brown
Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Ranking Member Patrick Toomey
Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez
Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member James Risch
House Financial Services Committee Chairwoman Maxine Waters
House Financial Services Committee Ranking Member Patrick McHenry
House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks
House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Michael McCaul