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U.S. puts virtually all foreign aid on 90-day hold, issues 'stop-work' order

JANUARY 24, 2025 · 6:41 PM ET

By

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After being inaugurated for his second president term, President Donald Trump has frozen virtually all U.S. foreign aid and issued a "stop work" order for groups in other countries that are funded by the U.S. government. Above: At the start of the pandemic, members of the Honduran Armed Forces carry a box containing diagnostic kits to test for COVID-19, donated by the United States Agency for International Development and the International Organization for Migration.

Orlando Sierra/AFP via Getty Images/AFP

Virtually all aid programs around the world that depend on U.S. funding will need to halt their operations because of a State Department memo issued on Friday to "stop work."

The internal memo, obtained by NPR, expands on President Trump's executive order, issued on Monday, to freeze foreign assistance for 90 days.

The new instructions mean these programs will likely have to furlough or lay off employees and cease operations until a review determines whether they align with President Donald Trump's foreign policy agenda.



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Within 85 days "the government-wide comprehensive review of all foreign assistance shall be completed, and a report shall be produced to the Secretary of State for his consideration and recommendation to the President," according to the memo, which was signed by Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Exempt from the order: aid to Israel and Egypt as well as emergency food aid.

Overseas employees of USAID, the agency primarily responsible for administering humanitarian and development aid, will not be affected.

But many organizations that receive development funding from the U.S. are based in the country where they operate and employ both local and American staff. All these employees are at risk of losing their pay in the short term and their jobs in the long term.

Reaction from the aid world

A senior official at USAID expressed deep concern about the impact of the Friday order. The official sent a statement to NPR on the condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to speak in behalf of the agency.

"The work stop order is completely reckless," the statement read. "The impact of this stop order is meant to negatively disrupt not just US foreign aid programs and the intended beneficiaries of these programs but the daily lives of people who deliver this critical aid: people with families to take care of, who have to buy food, pay rent and utilities. Yes, reform of US foreign aid is desperately needed but these draconian measures are unhelpful."

The leader of a humanitarian organization that partners with USAID told NPR: "They've thrown a grenade right into the middle of foreign assistance. People's lives around the world are jeopardized." This individual asked for anonymity fearing retribution against their organization for speaking out.

"We will probably have to pull our staff providing critical services in the field and lay off US staff," the leader told NPR. "We can't afford to keep funding our programs because we don't know if we will be reimbursed per our contracts with U.S. agencies."

Aid experts are warning that this move could have a destabilizing effect in countries where humanitarian aid is critical.

"It's having seismic, seismic impacts for the entire global aid system," said Abby Maxman, the president of Oxfam America, a charity that does not take funding from the U.S. gov. "And really, frankly, it's a cruel decision that has life or death consequences for millions of people around the world."

"What we really need and want is the stop order decision to be reversed. We need funding and programming to go forward, for our partners, for our network, for our community, and at the very least, we need clear communication so people can plan in this terrible new reality," Maxman said.

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