**Deadly sanctions**

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When President Joe Biden decided to withdraw the US military from Afghanistan last year, much of America’s news media came down on him like a ton of bricks. Republicans piled on, calling the withdrawal an ‘unmitigated disaster’. But getting out was the right move.

In fact, the real mistake was the opposite: The Biden administration did not end the war, but continued it by other means, which are turning out to be more violent and destabilizing. The economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies are causing widespread, severe hunger in this desperately poor country. Unless those sanctions are soon reversed, it is estimated that more people will die from the economic impact of sanctions over the next year than the number who died in 20 years of war.

The most destructive economic sanction is the US confiscation of more than $7 billion in international reserves belonging to Afghanistan’s central bank. The reserves are needed for essential imports such as food and medicine, but also for the central bank to play its normal role in maintaining a functioning financial system and economic stability.

Aid groups trying to distribute food and save peoples’ lives cannot in many cases move the necessary funds, and the health care system has been collapsing. World Bank data released last month shows that food prices increased at an estimated 40 percent annual rate since August, putting food out of reach of many poor Afghans.

As a result of all this economic disruption, including the loss of billions of dollars of aid, 22.8 million people – more than half the population – are facing acute food insecurity. They include a million children under 5 “at risk of dying due to severe acute malnutrition”, according to Unicef.

It is not clear why the Biden administration has imposed such devastating sanctions on Afghanistan. The sanctions do not seem to be directed at overthrowing the Taliban. Rather, it could be that the Biden administration, after its bad political experience with the military withdrawal, does not want to take the risk of appearing to be ‘soft’ on the Taliban.

This is a political miscalculation as well as a moral one. The lethal effects of US sanctions in other countries have been mostly ignored because the sanctions have been widely misunderstood as punishing governments, rather than whole populations. But the case of Afghanistan is beginning to correct this misunderstanding. The most influential humanitarian organizations are explaining the grim chain of causality in public.

David Miliband, former British foreign secretary and head of the International Rescue Committee, which has 3,000 staff in Afghanistan, told the US Senate last month: “The proximate cause of this starvation crisis is the international economic policy which has been adopted since August, and which has cut off financial flows not just to the public sector, but in the private sector in Afghanistan as well”.

At the same hearing, Graeme Smith of the International Crisis Group told senators: “You need to address the reason why people are hungry, which is the collapse of the economy mostly due to Western economic restrictions”. On Feb. 11, the Biden administration issued an executive order to allocate Afghanistan’s central bank funds: Half of it ($3.5 billion) would be “for the benefit of the Afghan people”, and the other half would be for families of the victims of the Sept 11 terrorist attack, pending the outcome of legal claims.

In other words, none of the $7 billion Washington is holding would be returned to the central bank. Therefore, it continues the destruction of the Afghan economy and the resulting mass starvation. No amount of foreign aid will make up for that, and so far, it’s not clear how the Afghan people will benefit from the $3.5 billion reserved for them. As for the pending lawsuits, this appears to be a political distraction. The legal issues are not at all clear and could take years to resolve. How many poor people in Afghanistan should die to protect the US government from the possibility that it could end up with a tiny addition to its budget for this compensation? Some relatives of 9/11 victims who have spoken publicly about these questions have said, emphatically, that they don’t want to take any money away from people in Afghanistan.

Human Rights Watch immediately criticized the executive order, noting that the “restrictions on the banking system” are “intensifying the country’s already serious human rights crisis”. Other groups and experts concerned with humanitarian issues joined in. If Afghanistan continues to descend into a nightmare of starvation, suffering and death, the Biden administration will not escape blame for this, as well as for the refugee crisis. More than a million Afghans are estimated to have fled since August.

The Biden administration also will be blamed if the result is a failed state that allows for the establishment of a center for terrorist activity and recruitment, as happened in Syria when the Islamic State emerged there.

Excerpted: ‘Biden’s Sanctions on Afghanistan Could Kill More Civilians Than Two Decades of War’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org