

Lifesaving Aid Remains Halted Worldwide Despite Rubio's Promise

A new directive puts further exemptions on hold. Aid workers also say the U.S. government has made it impossible to pay partners around the world.



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When Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced last month that lifesaving humanitarian work would be exempt from a freeze on foreign aid, global health workers breathed a collective sigh of relief.

But a new directive has put such exemptions on hold.

Several senior employees at the U.S.A.I.D. Bureau of Global Health received an email Tuesday telling them to “please hold off on any more approvals” pending further directions from the acting chief of staff, according to a copy reviewed by The New York Times.

Senior officials at the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance received similar instructions during a meeting this week, according to a person familiar with what transpired.

For weeks, U.S.A.I.D. officials and the organizations, contractors and consultants who partner with them have struggled to continue the kind of work that Mr. Rubio promised to preserve — “core lifesaving medicine, medical services, food, shelter and substance assistance.”

Some waivers have been issued to programs that fall under Mr. Rubio's definition of "lifesaving" aid, but the payments system called Phoenix that U.S.A.I.D. relies on to disburse financial assistance has been inaccessible for weeks. That means even programs that received waivers have struggled to continue, according to multiple employees of U.S.A.I.D. and the partner organizations that rely on the funding they distributed.

The State Department did not reply to a request for comment for this article.

On Tuesday, Elon Musk, the billionaire tech entrepreneur empowered by President Trump to combat the agency, told reporters in the Oval Office that the administration had "turned on funding for Ebola prevention and for H.I.V. prevention." But in reality, the Ebola funding and virtually all of the H.I.V. prevention funding remains frozen, according to two U.S.A.I.D. employees and several aid groups.

Young engineers working for Mr. Musk seized control of the agency's payments system as they took over in recent weeks. And as part of the dismantling overseen by Mr. Musk, the State Department also recently circulated plans to reduce U.S.A.I.D. staff from about 10,000 workers to 611 who had been deemed essential personnel.

Without access to funding, organizations that partner with U.S.A.I.D. have been unable to pay their workers and suppliers for projects that were dependent on U.S. government funding.

The Norwegian Refugee Council, which does U.S.-backed humanitarian work in about 20 countries, said it has been unable to take advantage of the waivers because the agency's payments had stopped.

"We currently have millions of dollars in outstanding payment requests to the U.S. government," the group said in a statement, noting that civilians in conflict zones like Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan would suffer if its work stopped. "Without an immediate solution we may, at the end of February, be forced to halt U.S.-funded lifesaving humanitarian programs."

New political appointees at the State Department and U.S.A.I.D. have put other hurdles in place.

At one mission in Asia, officials received waivers for three programs, including one for malaria eradication, but then were told they needed waivers for individual projects under those programs, a person with knowledge of the impasse said.

Beleaguered U.S.A.I.D. staff members said this week that the waiver pause was a sign that the end of their lifesaving work and other projects may be near.

Agency officials were notified this week that some 350 awards would be canceled. It was not immediately clear how many of those contracts were on a list that circulated last week identifying about 800 potential award cancellations.

Unlike previous notifications, emails sent to staff on Wednesday alerting them to some of the most recent cancellations did not encourage them to check for potential exemptions.

People deputized by Mr. Trump and Mr. Musk have accused U.S.A.I.D. officials of delaying and trying to undermine efforts to terminate programs by conducting their own reviews of contracts to ensure lifesaving work is not canceled. However, those reviews would be needed to grant the waivers promised by Mr. Rubio.

As the reductions get underway, unions representing U.S.A.I.D. staff as well as companies and organizations that work with the aid agency have been scrambling to push back against the cuts through a series of lawsuits. Some have succeeded in obtaining temporary restraining orders against the president's efforts to dismantle the agency.

The plaintiffs have argued that the downsizing measures are unconstitutional and illegal, as Congress appropriated the funds for the agency and, by law, has to approve their withdrawal.

In one lawsuit, filed by companies that have had U.S.A.I.D. contracts for global programs, a development firm reported that \$250 million worth of health supplies were stuck in transit or "stranded in warehouses around the world" because of the

stop-work orders that accompanied the freeze. The firm, Chemonics, had to furlough about two-thirds of its U.S.-based staff in recent weeks.

Lawyers for the Trump administration argued in a response to one of the lawsuits that “the president has broad discretion to set the terms and conditions” on the provision of aid.

As the legal battles wear on, the drastic changes to the U.S. government’s premier foreign aid agency continue.

On Tuesday, the Trump administration fired the inspector general for U.S.A.I.D., Paul K. Martin, just one day after he released a report warning that staff reductions and spending freezes risked the misuse and waste of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars, according to three people familiar with the dismissal.

The report documented confusion around the waivers. It warned that nearly half a billion dollars of food aid was at risk of spoiling, and that a reduced ability to vet partner organizations had made it more difficult to ensure no U.S. money would go toward terrorism.

Also on Tuesday, the agency made another round of cuts to contractors, the latest at U.S.A.I.D. to be forced to leave.

And the General Services Administration, a federal agency that oversees building leases and other contracts, in recent days terminated the U.S.A.I.D.’s lease for headquarters space in the Ronald Reagan Building in downtown Washington. The General Services Administration said in a statement on Tuesday that it took down the aid agency’s signs and that the 570,000-square-foot space would be “repurposed for other government needs.”

U.S.A.I.D. employees in the building lobby on Monday reported seeing officials from other agencies, including U.S. Customs and Border Protection, surveying the office space. Employees learned on Tuesday that they had lost parking privileges because the agency’s leases had been canceled, according to a copy of an internal email obtained by The New York Times.

Almost all of the agency's employees have been barred from entering its headquarters for more than a week, though some of them were given access to their work email accounts this week in order to prepare for their departures.

Foreign Service officers working for the agency overseas have been ordered to leave their posts and return to the United States this month, as part of a move putting the vast majority of direct hires on administrative leave. The order has been temporarily delayed by a federal judge, who will next hear arguments in the case on Thursday.

Employees say they expect most of U.S.A.I.D.'s work force to be fired or pushed out, and the few remaining to be absorbed into the State Department. Both Mr. Trump and Mr. Musk, who has posted dark conspiracy theories about the aid agency on his social media platform, X, have called for its demise.

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