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Report for the Universal Periodic Review of the United States: Impact of the Humanitarian Funding Freeze on Refugee Women and Children

1. Introduction

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) represents a critical mechanism through which the United Nations assesses the human rights records of its member states every four years. This report delves into the humanitarian funding freeze enacted by the Trump administration, emphasizing its severe impact on refugee women and children. The need for effective humanitarian aid is amplified in times of conflict and crisis, making it essential to examine how the policies of a superpower like the United States shape humanitarian responses and the conditions experienced by vulnerable populations.

2. Background

2.1 Executive Order Overview

On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued an executive order titled "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," which paused all foreign aid encompassing humanitarian programs for a period of 90 days. This abrupt policy shift generated immediate uncertainty and confusion within the international aid community. The decision effectively halted programs across diverse sectors, including health, nutrition, education, and protection services, which were critical for millions in crisis.

2.2 Justification and Implications

The administration outlined its rationale for the freeze as a necessary measure to review and prevent wasteful spending. By calling for a reassessment of foreign aid priorities, the government aimed to ensure that funds would be used more effectively. However, the operational realities revealed that the freeze had immediate negative implications:

- **Waivers:** While limited waivers were included for "core life-saving medicine, medical services, food, shelter, and subsistence assistance," the criteria for these waivers were both opaque and lengthy. Many organizations found themselves in limbo, unable to provide assistance while navigating bureaucratic hurdles (Devex, 2025; UN OCHA, 2025).

- **Uncertainty and Chaos:** The freeze exacerbated existing challenges in humanitarian delivery, creating an atmosphere of chaos and disruption within donor relationships. Humanitarian programs were abruptly suspended, resulting in staff layoffs and a significant re-evaluation of commitments from other funding sources (Hindustan Times, 2025).

3. General Trends in Humanitarian Funding and Cash-Based Assistance (CVA)

Prior to the funding freeze, the landscape of international humanitarian assistance was already precarious. The overall volume of international humanitarian assistance (IHA) peaked in 2022 but began to decline in subsequent years due to heightened global conflicts and a worsening climate crisis. At the time of the freeze, about **46 million people** were facing acute food insecurity, a situation that was likely to worsen as funding decreased (World Food Programme, 2024).

Cash-Based Assistance (CVA) is particularly crucial during crises, as it empowers affected populations to make informed choices about their specific needs. However, projections indicated a **29% decline** in CVA for 2024, which would further complicate the efforts of humanitarian actors and deepen the crisis (Global Humanitarian Overview, 2024).

4. US Government Contribution to Global Humanitarian Aid

4.1 Percentage of US Support for Humanitarian Programs

Historically, the United States has been a leading contributor to global humanitarian efforts, consistently ranking as one of the top donors. In 2022, the US accounted for approximately **42%** of global CVA funding (Hindustan Times, 2025). Given the immense scale of this contribution, any reductions had profound implications:

- **Operational Dependency:** Many humanitarian organizations, including the UN and various NGOs, rely heavily on US funding to address urgent needs in crisis-affected countries. A decline in this support not only jeopardizes specific projects but threatens the overall effectiveness of the humanitarian assistance framework.

5. Impact of the Funding Freeze on Humanitarian Operations

5.1 Effects on UN Agencies and NGOs

The 90-day funding freeze imposed by the Trump administration had severe and multifaceted implications for both UN agencies and non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) engaged in humanitarian operations worldwide. As frontline responders to crises that affect millions, these organizations faced unprecedented operational challenges that severely compromised their ability to deliver critical aid and services. The ramifications of the funding freeze can be categorized into several key areas.

1. Suspension of Programs and Services

The immediate impact of the funding freeze resulted in the suspension of numerous humanitarian programs. UN agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), and UNICEF reported significant disruptions to their operations. For example:

- **Health Services:** Programs providing essential health care services—including maternal and child health, vaccinations, and disease prevention—were halted. In conflict zones where healthcare systems were already fragile, this cessation meant that millions lost access to critical services that could prevent disease outbreaks, address malnutrition, or treat otherwise survivable health conditions (OCHA, 2025).
- **Food Assistance:** The WFP, which plays a pivotal role in combating hunger globally, faced severe cutbacks. With millions already dependent on food aid due to conflicts, such as the situations in Yemen and Syria, the freeze led to the scaling back of food distributions. Reports indicated that food rations were either reduced or completely suspended, posing significant risks of starvation among vulnerable populations (World Food Programme, 2024).
- **Protection Services:** Protection programs for refugees and displaced persons, aimed at safeguarding individuals from violence and exploitation, were also suspended. This increase in risk is particularly concerning for women and children, who are especially vulnerable in conflicts (UNHCR, 2025).

2. Operational Capacity and Staffing Challenges

The funding freeze led to immediate layoffs and staff reductions across multiple organizations. Many NGOs reported that they had no choice but to cut programs and downsize their workforce:

- **Layoffs:** Organizations like Doctors Without Borders and the International Rescue Committee had to lay off employees or furlough staff temporarily due to financial uncertainty. This loss of human resources not only weakened operational capacity but also diminished the organizations' institutional knowledge and experience,

further complicating recovery efforts once funding was restored (Devex, 2025).

- **Reduced Programmatic Reach:** With fewer staff members, NGOs encountered logistical difficulties in managing ongoing programs. Essential capabilities, such as community engagement and needs assessment, suffered as fewer personnel were available to interact with affected populations (Hindustan Times, 2025). This limited presence on the ground led to a disconnect between humanitarian needs and the responses available, exacerbating the impact of the freeze.

3. Increased Financial Strain and Operational Costs

The uncertainty created by the funding freeze exacerbated financial strain on both UN agencies and NGOs. The challenges included:

- **Operational Continuity Costs:** Many organizations experienced increased operational costs due to the need to maintain a minimal level of service or prepare for sudden program reactivation once funds were restored. Such costs included the maintenance of infrastructural support, storage facilities for humanitarian supplies, and the keeping of staff on standby, all of which strained limited budgets even further.
- **Reliance on Unstable Funding:** The freeze prompted many agencies to rely more heavily on short-term emergency funding from private donors or alternative sources. However, this type of funding is often unstable and insufficient, creating uncertainty for long-term program planning and execution. Agencies found themselves competing for shrinking funds in an increasingly complex global fundraising landscape (OCHA, 2025).

4. Impact on Supply Chain and Logistics

Humanitarian agencies often rely on means of logistics and supply chain management that are dependent on consistent funding. The freeze inhibited these functions in various ways:

- **Procurement Delays:** The inability to commit to new contracts or the procurement of supplies led to significant delays in essential goods delivery. Consequently, there were lapses in vital humanitarian supplies, such as food, medicines, and sanitation products, worsening the existing crises within affected populations (UNICEF, 2024).
- **Transportation Issues:** NGOs often face challenges in transporting supplies to remote or conflict-affected areas. The funding freeze escalated these challenges,

resulting in lost contracts with transporters who could not afford to continue services without upfront payments. Skepticism from potential partners also increased, as organizations were viewed as unreliable under the uncertainty created by the funding halt.

5. Altered Programmatic Strategies and Prioritization

Many humanitarian agencies were compelled to reassess and alter their strategies in direct response to the freeze or even some of them were forced to stop their services and close their centers. This reassessment involved:

- **Prioritization of Lifesaving Interventions:** In the face of resource constraints, agencies were forced to prioritize lifesaving interventions over broader humanitarian initiatives. For instance, while the developmental aspects of humanitarian aid — such as education — are essential for long-term recovery, many organizations shifted their focus to immediate survival needs, like food distribution and emergency medical care.
- **Increased Coordination and Partnerships:** The funding freeze prompted various organizations to improve their coordination and collaborate more closely. By sharing resources and leveraging partnerships, agencies worked to maximize their reach and efficacy, though these partnerships often come with their own challenges related to mission alignment and governance (Devex, 2025).

5.2 Consequences for Vulnerable Populations

The funding freeze disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations, especially refugee women and children, who already face heightened risks in crisis contexts:

- **Health and Education Disruptions:** The suspension of health programs severely limited access to vaccinations, nutrition, and life-saving healthcare services. Millions in conflict zones had their healthcare needs unmet, risking outbreaks and increased mortality (UNICEF, 2024).
- **Food Insecurity:** As the freeze continued, the risk of starvation escalated. Regions heavily dependent on US aid witnessed rising food prices and dwindling supplies, directly threatening food security, particularly for women and children who often prioritize family needs ahead of their own (World Food Programme, 2024).

5.3 Specific Case Studies

Several case studies illustrate the stark consequences of the funding freeze:

- **Afghanistan:** The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan sharply deteriorated following the funding freeze. Estimates suggested that **20 million people** were at immediate risk of losing access to life-saving health and protection services (UN OCHA, 2025). The US has played a major role in funding humanitarian response in Afghanistan, making up 43.9% of all reported humanitarian funding in the country (OCHA accessed 30/01/2025). This is complemented by substantive support for development and security (more than USD 657 million since 2022) (SIGAR 30/01/2025). The sudden and disruptive nature of the US aid freeze and subsequent cuts means considerable gaps in funding for Afghanistan. Although the potential long-term impacts of the funding cuts are not yet clear, if alternative sources of funding are not found, there is likely to be an increase in humanitarian needs alongside reduced access to vital services and the rolling back of hard-earned development gains to reduce aid dependency¹.
- As reported by Norwegian Refugee Council, Due to United States funding suspensions and cuts, NRC has been forced to end some of its programming in Afghanistan, including community resource centres, as well as shelter and livelihoods support. The closure of programmes has led to the closure of two provincial offices and necessitated termination of dozens of contracts, including both international and Afghan staff. Decisions made in distant capitals, with little regard for human consequences, have drastically reduced humanitarian funding for Afghanistan and severely limited our ability to respond to urgent needs. These sharp cuts to foreign assistance reflect a blatant disregard by key donors for the 0.7% of gross national income that OECD countries should contribute to those in greatest need. To prevent catastrophic damage in Afghanistan, the international community needs to step up and commit to supporting a population that has faced decades of war and neglect².

6. Challenges Faced by Refugee Women and Children

There is no denying the severity of the funding freeze and cuts or their current and future implications on both refugees and humanitarian aid providers. That said, some responders who participated in the JASes highlighted the importance of using this massive disruption as an opportunity to think about things differently. One suggestion was that a strategic rethink might force humanitarian responders to evaluate what kinds of programmes are increasing exposure to aid dependency and to look for more sustainable solutions. JAS participants also noted that responders may be forced to

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https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20250401_ACAPS_Thematic_report_Afghanistan_implications_of_the_US_foreign_aid_cuts_on_humanitarian_response.pdf

² <https://www.nrc.no/news/2025/march/afghanistan-crippling-aid-cuts-threaten-lives-and-wellbeing-of-the-most-vulnerable>

review funding inefficiencies and increase reliance on local expertise (JAS 24/02/2025 b). One participant emphasised that there remains a need for a collective, coordinated response, and that the freeze and any subsequent cuts may force humanitarian responders to collaborate and develop cost-effective and coordinated systems. There was also a suggestion that this might be the push needed for effective localisation (JAS 25/02/2025 a). According to JAS participants, organisations working on civil society support, governance, media, and women-led organisations are most likely to be affected as their activities are not covered in the HNRP and they are less likely to be able to secure alternate funding (JAS25/02/2025 b).³

The humanitarian funding freeze compounded the existing challenges faced by refugee women and children. These groups are often more vulnerable than their male counterparts due to entrenched gender inequalities and societal roles. Key challenges include:

- **Increased Gender-Based Violence (GBV):** Risks of GBV dramatically rise during times of crisis. Refugee women and girls may find themselves in precarious living situations, making them susceptible to violence and exploitation. Without adequate funding for protection and legal support services, the safety of women and children is jeopardized (UN Women, 2024).
- **Lack of Education Opportunities:** Educational programs, which are crucial for the future of displaced children, were significantly disrupted due to funding shortages. Education not only equips children with necessary life skills but also provides a sense of normalcy and structure amidst chaos. The funding freeze forced many educational initiatives to close, leaving countless children without access to learning (UNICEF, 2024).
- **Health Care Access:** Women, who bear the brunt of caregiving, often need specific health services, including maternal health care. The freeze meant a loss of access to prenatal and postnatal care, significantly impacting the health outcomes for mothers and infants in refugee populations (OCHA, 2025).
- **Food Insecurity and Nutrition:** Refugee children are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition. The reduction in humanitarian aid exacerbated food insecurity, driving many families into desperation. Malnutrition can lead to long-term health issues, stunting growth and cognitive development in children (World Food Programme, 2024).

9. Recommendations

To mitigate the ongoing humanitarian crisis stemming from the funding pause, the following recommendations are essential:

One important recommendation is to exempt humanitarian sectors from the economic sanctions imposed on targeted countries by the U.S. This is crucial given the adverse effects of recent Trump-era policies that have disrupted humanitarian assistance.

Such an action would help preserve and enhance the humanitarian conditions of vulnerable communities while ensuring that human principles are upheld in economic policies.

1. **Immediate Resumption of Humanitarian Aid:** The US government should lift the freeze on foreign aid immediately, reinforcing support for vital humanitarian operations.
2. **Clear Waiver Processes:** Establish transparent and accessible guidelines for the waiver process to ensure that critical services access is maintained for individuals in crisis situations.
3. **Focused Support for Women and Children:** Prioritize the specific needs of refugee women and children in humanitarian response strategies to counteract the adverse effects of funding cuts and ensure that aid reaches those most in need.

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