Local

May 11 Virtual Meeting
Marylia Kelley of Tri-Valley CAREs on The State of Disarmament

Tri-Valley CAREs director to address nuclear weapons in a time of pandemic

In this moment of the Coronavirus pandemic, significant changes are taking place that may alter – for better or for worse – the prospects for nuclear disarmament. This year marks the 75th Anniversary of the only times (so far) that a nuclear weapon was used as a weapon of war – the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. It is also the 50th Anniversary of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which constitutes a “grand bargain” wherein the nuclear weapons states signatories, like the U.S., agreed to give up their stockpiles and nonnuclear weapons states agreed not to acquire them. The NPT 5-Year Review Conference, scheduled for this spring, has been postponed “to no later than April 2021.” The delay was caused by the pandemic but will allow the U.S. to perhaps enter with a new administration and a less belligerent tone, if not an actual plan to achieve compliance.

This year we also expected to see the entry into force of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was approved by a plurality of non-nuclear weapons states in 2017, and whose existence threa
tens the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia will also be a focus, coming up for renewal in 2021.

In this context, we witness Donald Trump’s Fiscal Year 2021 budget request, which elevates the National Nuclear Security Administration’s coffers by 20% over last year and a whopping 50% since he took office. The choices are stark: new global arms race or revitalized treaties; new health care infrastructure or new warheads of nuclear destruction.

To help sort out key details on these various decisions, as well as offer ideas about what to expect and what can be done, longtime nuclear disarmament advocate Marylia Kelley – Executive Director of Tri-Valley CAREs (Communities Against a Radioactive Environment) – will be PASMC’s guest speaker on Monday, May 11. The meeting will be conducted on the Zoom platform, with Marylia presenting and the usual Q & A session to follow.

Marylia will discuss the near-term future of nuclear disarmament, internationally and in our Bay Area “backyard.” She will share upcoming actions we can still take at the local, national and international levels. The meeting will begin at 7 PM, and we will send out login information on our email listserv. If you are not receiving our emails, contact us at smpa@sanmateopeaceaction.org.

Marylia Kelley cofounded Tri-Valley CAREs in 1983 in her hometown of Livermore, out of twin concerns for the nuclear policy and environmental effects of its largest employer, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory – one of two places in the U.S. where nuclear weapons are designed. She and Tri-Valley CAREs pursue a number of peace-related goals, which include the end of design and testing of nuclear weapons and the conversion of LLNL into a civilian science “green lab.”

Please join us on May 11 for a look at the immediate future of disarmament efforts, by one of those efforts’ most experienced and effective proponents.

Summary of January 26 Meeting
Zunes on Middle East Policy, Trump Style

Dr. Stephen Zunes, Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco, brought a lot of background and some strong opinions regarding how the Trump administration has handled U.S. affairs in the Middle East. The issues of Israel and Palestine, Syria, Iran, etc. are delicate enough in the hands of an experienced diplomat; Zunes pointed out how current treatment of the region has created the possibility of a string of failings.

Dr. Zunes began with the 2016 presidential election campaign, when Trump promised to be tough on the Islamic State and terrorists in general. Trump also attacked his Democratic opponent Hilary Clinton for her vote in support of the Iraq War, as well as her part in the U.S. role in the 2011 Libya civil conflict. Zunes contrasted Clinton’s “clear record” of hawkishness with Trump’s lack of any record. This gave Trump one more way to tap into shifting opinions on the war – including those of white working-class voters who had lost loved ones. It also, said Zunes, led to a lack of motivation among some progressive voters who stayed home on election day.
After Trump “disingenuously” claimed to oppose intervention, said Zunes, his election was marked by a reliance on a team of advisors that included “ridiculous Islamophobes, real extremists…people who are, frankly, quite ignorant” and who didn’t listen to professionals in the State Department. There was “no policy per se”, he said.

Dr. Zunes called out Trump’s approach to the Israel/Palestine issue. “He doesn’t even pretend that we’re out to support democracy, he doesn’t even pretend to support Palestinian statehood.” The Republican platform ignores the idea of a two-state solution, rejects as a “false notion” that Israel is an occupier, and declares “there should be no daylight between America and Israel.” As such, he said, aid to Israel has been increased to “unprecedented levels.”

Dr. Zunes criticized Trump’s then-soon-to-be-announced “peace plan” (which was soon discredited). It would give Israel the right to annex “huge swathes” of the settlements and leave Palestinians with tiny enclaves of land. Instead of the full independence they seek, the plan would leave them with what he called “a limited amount of self-government”. There is also recognition of the annexation of the Golan Heights, which he also called “a clear violation of the United Nations charter” forbidding a country to expand its territory by force. Zunes also cited such provocative acts as moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, rejection of a Palestinian claim to the eastern half of the city, and slashing funding to the UN Relief Works Agency which benefits impoverished Palestinians.

Dr. Zunes turned next to Iraq, Syria and the fight against the Islamic State. He noted last fall that there were 5,000 U.S. troops in Syria without its permission. While concern over the rise of the IS made a U.S. presence less objectionable even among some antiwar people, he pointed out that the unlimited air power Trump gave the Air Force resulted in the death of thousands of civilians in Iraqi cities like Raqqa and Mosul. He likened such victims to “human shields”.

Dr. Zunes also discussed how a U.S. pullout from Syria left the Kurds vulnerable to an attack from the Turkish military. The Kurds, he said, had a self-governing democratic society, which may have been another reason for Turkey’s antagonism. But they were also a strong ally against IS. While some who favored a U.S. withdrawal suggested we also threaten Turkey with sanctions and a cutoff of security assistance should they attack the Kurds, “Trump”, said Zunes, “basically said ‘come on in…take over’”. The result of his irresponsible move was a brutal invasion and a Kurdish alignment with Syria.

Meanwhile, he added, U.S. troops weren’t coming home; rather than protect the Kurds, they were in Syria protecting oil fields, and “protecting” Iraq and Saudi Arabia from Iran (even though the Saudis spend far more on their military than Iran).

Another Trump priority was support for the brutal Saudi war in Yemen, which Dr. Zunes called “probably the worst humanitarian crisis in the world”. When Congress moved to cut off funding for the U.S. military role, Trump declared a national emergency to override its authority. Saudi brutality, said Zunes, only got attention after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In a similar vein, he noted the move to isolate Qatar, which was based on Saudi demands to shut down Al-Jazeera, the news outlet based there.

Dr. Zunes turned to Iran, first focusing on the assassination of military leader Qassim Soleimani. Zunes said Soleimani “really was bad news”; though engaged in the fight against IS in Iraq, he also killed many Sunni civilians and committed human rights violations. But Zunes also challenged the notion that he killed “hundreds of Americans” with roadside bombs during the Iraq war. The general conclusion was rather that those improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were Iraqi-made.

Dr. Zunes said while Trump thinks he can bully Iran into submission, “It doesn’t work that way” against a country with a strong nationalist identity that has been a regional power for 2500 years. Zunes related a conversation with Iran’s foreign minister Javad Zarif, who said he had to persuade hard-liners that the P5+1 nuclear weapons deal would be worth getting U.S sanctions lifted, but with the deal broken and sanctions re-imposed, the moderate Iranian government has been marginalized. This undermines the U.S. wish to bring change there. Plus Iran has shown signs it will “ratchet up the consequences” with more development of its nuclear capabilities.

Dr. Zunes found “signs of hope” in Sudan, which he had recently visited. With a brutal dictatorship oppressing the southern part of the country – resulting in that part of the country breaking away to form South Sudan – in December of 2018 a nonviolent civil resistance spread across the country. Despite a government crackdown that included hundreds of civilians shot to death, the dictator Al Bashir was then forced out by the military, which itself was met by more resistance from millions of citizens. The resulting civilian government, said Zunes, counters a western view of Africans as “irrational, violent, extremists”, which assumes a need to prop up authoritarian leaders to control them. Trump, he added, has nonetheless maintained strict economic sanctions on Sudan – after sending $1½ billion when Al Bashir was in power – and still calls Sudan a state sponsor of terrorism, which prevents other countries from investing in the country. In this way, Zunes said, “even a hopeful sign” is suppressed by the U.S. He briefed a Congressional delegation about all of this.
Speaking of U.S. Middle East-related politics, Dr. Zunes talked about a “battle” within the Democratic party over these issues; in 2016 the hawks and hard-liners in the party prevailed on its platform. There was language calling out Iran not just for terrorism but also its military intervention and suppression of women’s rights (the Saudis, who we support, are much worse, he pointed out). The platform also called for military action if Iran violated the nuclear deal, even though such action would itself be a violation. The Democrats also defeated language in the 2016 platform calling for an end to Israeli occupation and illegal settlements in Palestine. They then approved language praising Israel and demanding the Palestinians negotiate a peace agreement guaranteeing peace and security for Israel – a position the Palestinians already have established.

Dr. Zunes called it a “sign of hope” that such views are shared by Trump and that, given his extreme politics so contrary to where Democrats typically stand, some of them have drawn a distance between their side and his. Among the (albeit now far-shrunken) Democratic candidate field as of January 26, there were calls to make aid to Israel conditional to support for an unoccupied Palestinian state – as well as for pulling all of our troops out of the Middle East where practical.

With the Palestinian issue becoming more of a priority, Dr. Zunes hopes such solutions come to the fore for the Democrats in 2020. He further expressed hope for the peace movement to continue to weigh in on the issue, as we did regarding war on Iran – for which both chambers of Congress voted to cut off funds. In his opinion, that was a sign of progress where much more is needed.

Ron Zucker

**Membership Report**

Peace Action of San Mateo County gratefully welcomes back these renewing members:

Minnette Berger, Nancy and David Crabbe, Linda Durkee, Timonic Hood and family, Caryl Hughan, Adrienne Lonzarich, Louis Maraviglia, Joanne McMahon, Tom Newman, John St. Peter, Linda Whitley, Bob and May-Blossom Wilkinson

**Summary of February 23 Meeting**

**Dr. Hallinan’s Predictions and Prescriptions**

Journalist Dr. Con Hallinan came to the February PASMC meeting to talk about water and climate change – not despite the fact of concerns over peace, nuclear weapons and related treaties, but because of them. Conn’s thesis that “water is essentially a peace issue” is based on the notions that the lack of it could 1) start wars, 2) produce conditions to destabilize societies (which again could produce wars), and 3) “kill our planet” – from an environmental standpoint.

His prime example of such possibilities involved the volatile relations between India and Pakistan, which became a potential crisis in early 2019 when the two countries traded minor military attacks. The two sides settled that dispute, but he alluded to a largely unreported matter in which the Indian government threatened to shut down the flow of six of its rivers that flow through Pakistan. This would end the 1960 Indus Valley Waters Treaty, and likely would be considered not only a “life-or-death situation” for Pakistan in its crucial dependence on India’s water, but also an “act of war”, said Conn.

He noted that both countries have 120-150 nuclear warheads. Should Pakistan again initiate hostilities, India’s military policy allows it to pursue and launch an attack, and the possible escalation could result in a nuclear exchange between both countries.

Conn listed some global consequences of such a “local nuclear war”: 45 million people would be immediately killed, and there would be a 6% decline in rainfall worldwide. This would reduce typical Asian monsoons by 20%, and the world’s grain resources also by 20% in 5 years, and by more in subsequent years. A nuclear cloud “would make growing wheat impossible” in Canada and Russia, and global starvation would lead to 100 million deaths. And the ozone layer would be reduced by 20-50% over the northern hemisphere, leading to an increase in skin cancer.

Conn next turned to the global climate crisis and its own connection to water issues. At the current rate of global warming, he said, by the year 2100 two-thirds of the Himalayan glaciers will be gone. He called that area the “3rd pole” of global fresh water – the headwaters for rivers in 11 countries. China (which he said “largely controls the 3rd pole”) and India alone, he said, have 34% of the world’s population and 10% of its water resources. This leaves not a lot to go around, and the situation is compounded if temperatures soar to 120 degrees in the region as expected. Such conditions, he added, would be duplicated in South America and the Middle East.

As a result, China is just one country that builds dams for its water and power but to the detriment of neighboring countries whose crops will be ruined by the reduction in downstream waterflow and the increase of salt water into the area’s deltas. That condition is matched in Iraq, whose date industry has been undermined by Turkey-built dams in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Fighting over control of these two rivers, Conn said, has increased tensions among Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Such animosity parallels contention among African countries in the Blue Nile. And Israel, Jordan and Palestine wran-
ple over the Jordan River and its water, where Israel controls 87% of the aquifers – leaving Palestinians 75 liters per day when 100 liters is the minimum required for world health standards.

Conn compared symptoms of the climate crisis in the southern hemisphere to those of the north. Higher temperatures cause more water vapor in the north, which causes rainfall in the “10s of inches”, he said, but in the southern part of Europe, decreased water flow renders rivers (such as the Rhine in Germany) that are normally transportation corridors difficult to navigate. Meanwhile, Russia’s permafrost – two-thirds of its land mass – is now melting, which releases carbon dioxide and methane, both gases that speed up global warming. And the ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica are disintegrating, the eventual result of which will be a six-foot rise in sea level. That in turn would cause, he said, a migration of coastal residents to inland areas to escape flooding, and a big increase of salt water from the sea into farmland.

Having put before the audience quite a set of problems, Conn turned to possible solutions. He began with water-related matters, noting the expensive (thus hard to rely on implementation from poor countries) remedies of desalinization and drip agriculture. He did cite California’s current progress on refilling our aquifers by catching and directing rainwater. He described the Indus Valley agreement as the only real water agreement, and a good example (despite the regional tensions) with its emphasis on control of water flow and infrastructure, as well as the exchange of information and binding arbitration.

But Conn also suggested that climate-related agreements might best happen on a global scale, rather than “country-by-country”, adding that both water- and climate-related issues require world capital and infrastructure. He mentioned the nonbinding 1997 United Nations Watercourse Convention, which China did not sign and from which India and Pakistan abstained – leaving it as just a “model” rather than something that would be in force.

He also called the Paris Climate Accords “no longer adequate”, with only 7 of its 195 signatories close to achieving its goal of a 1.5 degrees Celsius maximum increase...and its largest participant, the U.S., now absent. The new goal is for a 2.0 Celsius increase, but Conn cited the notion of an (on track) 3.0 increase, which would bring mass flooding and the 6-foot increase in sea level he mentioned earlier. A 5.0 increase, he added, would replicate the climate of the Permian Extinction of 250 million years ago.

Turning to a role for the U.S., Conn touted the Green New Deal emerging in Congress. It would, he said, cut all hydrocarbon emissions by 2050, curb the use of industrial agriculture, and end polluting projects such as the Canadian Tarsands oil extraction. “It would also take a look at how we grow our food”, he said, where cattle raising calls for an outsized amount of land and water to produce a tiny fraction of what we eat. Conn cited pushback against the Green New Deal – including in recent Democratic presidential debates – calling it too expensive. His answer to it was a submission of the Pentagon’s F-35, a poorly-designed, dangerous-to-fly fighter plane with an ultimate $1.5 trillion price tag; and the equally-expensive “modernization” of the country’s nuclear weapons complex. The elimination of these two programs, Conn said, would pay for the Green New Deal. And, he added, it would produce millions of jobs. This would appear to be a net gain, the benefit of which it is up to us to communicate.

Ron Zucker

National
Carrying On
Edited from a message by Jon Rainwater, Executive Director of Peace Action
Our peace issues continue to be salient and urgent. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is pushing Donald Trump for war with Iran, even at this time. Sanctions against Iran are having a terrible toll as that country is ravaged by Coronavirus. Trump’s 2021 budget cuts Center for Disease Control and Health and Human Services and increases money for nuclear weapons.

And finally, this is a teachable moment. We need a reset for what “national security” means and entails. We’ve been funding stockpiles of $Trillions for F-35 jets for a threat that is not very real, while we have little stockpile of N95 respirator masks for a threat that is all too real. We can push this as a wake-up call to retool security strategy for the real threats we face for disease, climate change and national disasters. And for seeing our common humanity and the need to cooperate on the threats all communities face.

We will keep fighting on all these issues on the national and local level using whatever new tools and online prowess we can. We thank you for your support and encouragement!

Pandemic Reveals Misplaced Priorities
By Daryl G. Kimball, Arms Control Today
For decades, national security and health experts have warned of the risks of global threats that are simply too big for one country to handle, such as disease pandemics, climate change, and nuclear war. For many years, the response of our national and global leaders has fallen short.
Twenty years ago, John Steinbruner, then chair of the Arms Control Association Board of Directors, warned in his book Principles of Global Security that globalization is generating “a new class of security problems in which dispersed processes pose dangers of large magnitude and incalculable probability.” He argued that policymakers will have to shift from contingency reaction to anticipatory prevention and this will have to be done in global coalition.

Unfortunately, U.S. spending priorities and modes of thinking about security have become increasingly defined in military terms. Congress provided a record $746 billion for national defense in fiscal year 2020. U.S. arms manufacturers dominate the global arms trade and help fuel regional conflicts that undermine human development. In recent years, the Trump administration’s nationalist “America First” foreign policy has made it even more difficult for the world’s leading nations to work together on the toughest global challenges.

Today, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which threatens the lives and livelihoods of millions worldwide, has laid bare the terrible human cost of these misplaced policy choices.

As the scope and scale of the coronavirus threat began to reveal itself in January and February, the Trump administration focused on other matters. For example, the administration in February asked Congress for $44.5 billion in fiscal year 2021 for programs to maintain and upgrade the U.S. nuclear arsenal, a 19% increase above the previous year.

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The U.S. government spends tens of billions of taxpayer dollars to maintain a massive nuclear arsenal capable of destroying the planet many times over. Meanwhile, it does not have a stockpile of masks large enough to protect front-line health care workers who are battling COVID-19 and is proposing to cut programs that help provide for early disease detection.

The U.S. stockpile of medical supplies includes 12 million medical-grade N95 masks and 30 million surgical masks, which is only about 1 percent of the 3.5 billion needed in a year to deal with a disease pandemic. At the price of $0.50 a mask, it would cost approximately $1.75 billion to build up the N95 stockpile and about $350 million a year to replace expired masks, according to a report published by The War Zone. That is less than the $3.2 billion increase above fiscal year 2020 levels that the Pentagon is seeking for its multiyear programs to sustain and rebuild the U.S. triad of nuclear-armed missiles, submarines, and bombers.

Meanwhile, the administration is proposing to slash by 37 percent the budget request for the Defense Department’s Biological Threat Reduction Program, which “seeks to facilitate detection and reporting of diseases caused by especially dangerous pathogens.” As a result of that program’s previously provided threat reduction training efforts, local officials in Thailand detected the first case of the novel coronavirus there, only days after its initial discovery in Wuhan, China.

Now is the time for Congress to radically scale back the existing plan to replace and upgrade the already excessive U.S. nuclear arsenal, particularly plans for new missiles and bombers, new nuclear warheads, and production infrastructure. This would save billions of taxpayer dollars that should be spent on addressing higher priority human and health security needs.

Making matters worse, the United States has become part of the problem rather than helping to find viable solutions to counter the most serious global threats.

While the Trump administration is seeking to expand U.S. nuclear capabilities at the expense of programs that address human security needs, it is turning its back on hard-won agreements that have effectively reduced the nuclear threat.

Donald Trump’s unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal with no viable plan to replace it creates the potential for a new nuclear crisis. Iran’s leaders have retaliated to the reimposition of U.S. sanctions by breaching key limits on their nuclear activities.

In addition, the post-Cold War progress toward reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons has stalled. To date, Trump has failed to take up Russia’s offer to extend the only remaining treaty that limits the world’s two largest nuclear arsenals, the 2010 New Strategic Arms
Reduction Treaty. The global nonproliferation and disarmament regime, the best prophylactic against a nuclear pandemic, is under serious threat.

The unfolding COVID-19 outbreak will not only take away the lives of people, but it will change our personal lives, and it will very likely force changes in the international system. If we are to survive well into this century, there must be a profound shift in the way we deal with global security challenges and how we align our scientific, economic, diplomatic, and political resources to address the health, climate, and nuclear dangers that threaten us all.

Log on to www.armscontrol.org

**Film Review**

**Citizen K.**

“Citizen K.” is a revealing film of an enigmatic man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. He dared go eyeball-to-eyeball with Vladimir Putin on TV and lived to tell the tale. His is an unusual take on a wealth-obsessed (he is reported to have been the richest Russian ever!) young man who stumbles into his humanitarian soul later in life.

In interviews Khodorkovsky displays an ironic humor that apparently comes from his bedrock character. So profound is his ironic nature that it serves him well in his 10 years of imprisonment.

This is a film worth seeing both for its “thriller” aspect and its most unique main character. As a 14-year-old son of two impoverished engineers, he worked as a delivery boy, earned his first money and was immediately accosted by thugs who demanded said money. He fought off the three of them, received a knife wound, and learned the Russian ethic, “If you are not prepared to die for what you have, you are nothing”.

Apparently, when Communism ended, so did any rule of law. A period of flagrant crime ensued as there was no carry-over of law for the Republic of Russia, and the privatization of government industries became a windfall for cronies of Russian leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. At that point, 7 oligarchs emerged with 50% of the wealth of 140 million Russians. Vouchers of 4,000 rubles were handed out to everyone as seed money for capitalist investments. However, extremely poor Russians could not afford to “invest”, so the vouchers were quickly collected, dime on the dollars by thugs and scammers until in the hands of the oligarchs they were foundation blocks for huge, corrupt financial empires.

Khodorkovsky, as one of the 7 mega-rich “associates” of government, developed and earned millions in oil. Later, when Kukos, the national oil company valued at $5 billion was auctioned off to Khodorkovsky for $320 million, he pocketed a cool $4.68 billion. Such corruption was openly practiced with the single proviso from Putin: You run your business and I run the government.

The uncanny transformation of Khodorkovsky occurs shortly thereafter, when oil prices plunge, the Russian economy contracts, and he must lay off 10- to 15,000 employees. For the first time, we hear him speak of the devastation, hopelessness and starvation he and other potentates are causing. He pours millions into modernizing equipment, training for more efficient workers, marketing and distribution. As he sees, maybe for the first time, his immense assets can – along with satisfying his greed – improve the lives of thousands of oil workers.

With precisely that visionary sentiment, he confronts Putin on the president’s national TV channel. A visibly angry Putin loses the debate, changes the subject and soon after that orchestrates Khodorkovsky’s brand new tax evasion charges – with a predetermined conviction and a 7-day train trip to outermost Siberia for an 8-year imprisonment.

Putin is so reviled internationally that world leaders Angela Merkel, Tony Blair and others convince him that Khodorkovsky’s release, timed for the Sochi Winter Olympics, will boost his popularity. Khodorkovsky was released, left Russia with $500 million, and has worked tirelessly for a democratic Russia. He foresees much improvement soon – in the next 5-10 years – as he again shows that enigmatic smile.

**Gary Parma**

**Going “Viral”**

Yes, so things have gone “viral”. All the doubts and critics of a need for a National Health Plan with paid sick leave have to do some fancy dancing to get around the obvious evidence – that states which refused to expand their Medicaid, and the party that opposed efforts to create the Affordable Care Act, are in many cases now in quarantine themselves. My, how some things come around to bite you in the…well, you know.

Oh, let’s not “get political” about such a serious matter, they say. Well unfortunately, bad politics seem to have landed us right in the mud. We need to learn a bit from this. Although my hero Bernie probably won’t be the standard bearer for the Democratic nomination, his talking points and the manner in which reality has proven him totally correct will most certainly affect the Democratic platform going forward. That’s a good thing. Oh of course we take no official sides as a 501(C)4 chartered organization. How could I not mention that. We do believe in logic, science and common sense though.

**Mike Caggiano**
Action Alert
Pandemic and Sanctions – an Even Worse Mix

The global COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a wide variety of connections between nations, from the potential for cooperation at best, to the inhumane consequences of economic sanctions among the worst. Nothing demonstrates the latter like the U.S. sanctions on Iran while Iran suffers one of the world’s worst COVID-19 outbreaks. Human Rights Watch reported the country is unable to finance needed equipment and medicines, the result being a further overwhelming of its hospitals where space and supplies are needed to care for patients.

As with any sanctions – regarded functionally as an act of war – the main victims are a country’s citizens, not its leaders or its military. And this story is currently repeated in Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea and over 25 other countries. But now the potential circumstances are far worse. Nevertheless, Donald Trump increased sanctions on Iran in March.

To address the situation in Iran, 34 Congressional signers sent a letter to the White House at the end of March, calling for at least a temporary easing of sanctions on Iran. A few days later two moderate Democrats, Representative Eliot Engel, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and Senator Bob Menendez, Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, released a statement calling for an easing of the sanctions. While they claimed that Iran “has continued to sponsor terrorists around the world” and leveled many other criticisms, they did present a case for temporary relief.

To address the question of crippling sanctions and their possible limits, Minnesota Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar back in February introduced H.R. 5879, the Congressional Oversight of Sanctions Act, giving Congress the power “to impose certain limits” on the leveling of sanctions and other “national security authorities” by the President. Under this measure, Congress would be able to review sanctions after 60 days in order to see if they are valid. Considering the humanitarian disasters that sanctions have caused in this unique time, a little humanity from its members seems in order.

Action: Contact Rep. Jackie Speier or Anna Eshoo, or whomever represents you, and tell them to speak out for easing the sanctions on Iran at least while the COVID-19 pandemic ravages the world. (Eshoo’s constituents can thank her for signing the letter to the White House calling for helping Iran this way.) Also ask them to support H.R. 5879 in order to give Congress a say in whether such sanctions are necessary. Likewise ask Senators Diane Feinstein and Kamala Harris to call for easing the Iran sanctions during this time. Perhaps remind them that Iran’s caseload is over 23,000 and its death toll has surpassed 1800, and our government has played a sad part.

Put a Stamp on Fair Voting
In recent weeks we have seen a number of primary elections postponed due to the possibility of exposure by voters to the COVID-19 virus. Both they and poll workers share a justifiable caution against taking an election-day risk of infection. The possible effect on turnout has moved primary-election dates back – and it jeopardizes the efficacy of a properly-conducted and meaningful election day this November.

Roadblocks to an effective and accessible voting system were already considerable: Inconvenient polling locations with limited hours and long lines, difficulties getting time off from work, electronic voting machines vulnerable to hacking, transportation challenges, and voter suppression and intimidation have all been documented for years. Now the pandemic threatens to further exacerbate the situation.

With such thoughts in mind, the notion of a widespread – if not universal – vote-by-mail system is gaining momentum around the country. Along with the circulation of on-line petitions, a letter from 158 organizations of various ideological stripes (including Peace Action) was sent to Congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi, Charles Schumer, Kevin McCarthy and Mitch McConnell. The letter called for the implementation of such a vote-by-mail initiative in the next stimulus bill meant to get our country through the pandemic. The letter called for policies that expand voter registration, in-person early voting, no-excuse absentee voting by mail, voter education, and safe and fair in-person voting that doesn’t undermine vulnerable populations such as the elderly, handicapped, and people of color. The price tag for this piece of the bill – as estimated in efforts to add it to the previous stimulus package – would be around $2 billion.

Meanwhile, corresponding bills have emerged in both the House and Senate: The Resilient Elections During Quarantines and Natural Disasters Act of 2020 was introduced by Oregon Rep. Earl Blumenauer in the House (H.R. 6202) and Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden in the Senate (S.3440). Both measures focus on Election Day in November, in case of disruptions from COVID-19, or any other cases of pandemic or natural disaster in future elections. They require states and voting jurisdictions to come up with plans for vote-by-mail and absentee voting plans that are flexible and provide for everyone to cast a ballot.

California and the other states using a mail system of voting report a 15% increase in voter participation. Regardless of Republicans’ resistance to such an idea and
Trump’s concern that “you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again” with vote-by-mail and other safeguards (did he really think only Republicans would hear him say that on Fox News?), it would be a far better sign of a functioning democracy.

**Action:** Contact Rep. Speier or Eshoo and tell them the next pandemic-related stimulus package ought not get their vote if it doesn’t include at least $2 billion for a system of vote-by-mail and other voter protections. Share your feelings on such stimulus measures with Sens. Feinstein and Harris. Also urge Speier and Eshoo’s co-sponsorship of H.R. 6202, as well as Feinstein and Harris’ support for S.3440. Suggest that fair elections with maximum turnout is a bedrock principle of our country, and no amount of grandstanding by McConnell, McCarthy, Trump, et al can deny that.

**Protect Civil Liberties from COVID-19**

*Thanks to Democracy for America for some of the text in this alert.*

MSNBC, Rolling Stone and Politico are reporting that Trump’s Department of Justice is using the Coronavirus as a rationale for asking Congress to approve extraordinary powers to indefinitely detain people and suspend habeas corpus during times of natural disaster, civil disobedience, or other emergency situation. This would be applicable to “any statutes or rules of procedure otherwise affecting pre-arrest, post-arrest, pre-trial, trial, and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil processes and proceedings.” Which is to say that if someone has only been arrested, the DOJ wants to reserve the right for a judge to detain them indefinitely.

The Executive Director of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Norman Reimer, called the request “terrifying,” saying that it “means you could be arrested and never brought before a judge until they decide that the emergency or the civil disobedience is over.”

Right now, people who have been arrested are being held in detention centers at great risk — in close contact and provided with less-than-adequate supplies of soap, sanitizer, and protective equipment. This is hardly the time to be thinking about ways to lock more people up, especially for an indefinite amount of time, and especially under the “watchful eye” of Trump, his administration and his DOJ.

If Congress weighs in as asked, it needs to respond by protecting the constitutionally-protected rights of all Americans always and reject this dangerous demand by Trump’s DOJ immediately. It would otherwise be one more step toward an authoritarian state, and Trump and his braintrust would seem just the people to implement it.

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**From the Twitter Storm**

**#NoFirstUse Retweeted**

Max Blumenthal @MaxBlumenthal:

Mike Pompeo says countries that “build bombs and missiles and nuclear capability all while their people are starving” deserve to be sanctioned during the #COVID-19 pandemic.

Luckily for Pompeo, no country he represents on the world stage does things like this.

> There will be no Homeland Security until we realize that the entire planet is our homeland. Every sentient being in the world must feel secure.

John Perkins, economist and author
Peace Action of San Mateo County warmly thanks its members and friends for their support in these extraordinary times. We will of course resume our in-person speaker and film events, Saturday vigils and potluck dinners once it is safe to gather and share our thoughts and concerns in a group setting, with all of the face-to-face contact we miss. Until then, please stay safe, well and warm, and we’ll “see” you on May 11 with Marylia Kelley!