

CNN interview with Chris Milligan, retired USAID Counselor, about chaotic effects of current USAID personnel policies, 12 Feb 2025

BROWN: Well, this will no doubt be a week of agonizing uncertainty and rattled nerves for 2,200 employees of USAID alone.

A federal judge has paused until Friday President Trump's plan to place them on paid leave. This move is part of the president's effort to gut the global humanitarian agency and retain only several hundred employees.

Chris Milligan served as a Foreign Service officer at USAID for 31 years under six presidential administrations. He retired a few years ago.

Thank you for coming on.

You're still in touch with your colleagues, but it's interesting because you were just telling me that, under the first Trump administration, you were the highest-level career employee under the Trump administration, and it was so different than compared to now.

Tell us about that.

CHRIS MILLIGAN, RETIRED USAID COUNSELOR: Yes. We had a very positive experience under the first Trump administration.

The administration came in and they said, how can we help you at USAID do your job better? So they enacted reforms, listened to employees that strengthened the ability of USAID to do serve as a national security agency, and they strengthened the work force.

The employees felt valued and they felt listened to. We also received a lot of support from the White House. We were very appreciative of the adviser to the president Ivanka Trump's efforts to launch a USAID initiative that strengthened women's entrepreneurship.

And we were very grateful for the first lady Melania's visit to the USAID project sites in Africa, highlighting the good work of American people overseas.

BROWN: And now it's completely different. All of these employees are in limbo. What are they telling you about their ability to do their jobs right now?

MILLIGAN: Well, first, they're confused, because the very same types of programs that were put in place under the Trump administration are now on hold, and they don't understand why.

And the same employees that serve honorably and supported President Trump's initiatives are now being denigrated. It's really hitting the employees overseas a lot harder. It's hitting everyone hard, but those overseas are in a particularly vulnerable situation.

They're not getting clear guidance. Some are told, be ready to pack your bags and others are saying, sit and wait. So a lot of them are in survival mode. They are trying to protect their families. They are being prepared to be evacuated. They have no homes to go to. They are being told to have to leave

their possessions and pets behind.

They're having difficulty accessing health care. For example, I know the case of at least 20 women with high-risk pregnancies that can't get the medical care they need. They tried to be medevaced to the States. They weren't able to be medevaced. And one now is in a life- threatening situation.

I heard from one Foreign Service officer whose mother is critically ill overseas. She can't get back to the States. So they -- the other concern I hear is, many are facing potential financial ruin. And they wonder why after serving the country overseas for so many years are they be treating this way? Why are they being punished? What happened?

BROWN: What do you say to Americans who are out there and looking at the way and some of the USAID funds were being used, appropriated by Congress, we should note and say, well, gosh, I didn't even realize that, maybe my money, my taxpayer dollars shouldn't be going to that?

What do you say to those Americans?

MILLIGAN: That's a very fair question.

What I would like to tell those Americans is that every dollar that USAID spends is approved by the ambassador at post and then approved under the authority of the secretary of state back in the State Department, that, besides the fact that 98 percent of USAID spending is earmarked from Congress, directed by Congress, is all then notified back to Congress.

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So the idea that there's this rogue cell of USAID officers doing mischievous things is -- doesn't make sense. Every penny is notified and accounted for. Every program is approved at the higher levels.

Now, do political priorities change between administrations? Absolutely. I have served through six political administrations. The vast majority of programs continue to be the same because national security policy remains the same. But there are things that change. That's fair.

And there's a process for changing them without gutting an entire agency.

BROWN: All right, Chris Mulligan, thank you -- Milligan, I should say. Thank you for coming on and sharing your perspective.

Thank you for joining us. I'm Pamela Brown. You can follow me on Instagram, TikTok and X @PamelaBrownCNN.