

Trump's foreign aid demolition hits major Christian charities. By John Hudson, Missy Ryan and Katharine Houreld, *The Washington Post*, 6 Mar 2025



Ukrainians line up for humanitarian aid distributed from the Samaritan's Purse mission at a church in Ocheretyne, Ukraine, last year. (Narciso Contreras/Anadolu/Getty Images)

In a closed-door meeting, U.S. officials touted their success in “zeroing out” foreign assistance, but the downsizing has clipped religious allies, too.

President Donald Trump’s senior aides held a closed-door meeting Friday with faith-based charities at the State Department where they touted the administration’s success in “zeroing out” foreign aid and forecast a future where church groups and billionaires would replace the government in caring for the world’s most vulnerable.

“Do you want the country to get credit for foreign aid, or do you want the Creator to get the credit?” asked Albert Gombis, a State Department political appointee, according to two people who attended the meeting.

Most of the aid groups in attendance — affiliated with evangelical Christianity — had viewed the Trump administration as a political ally. But the leaders of the groups relayed painful effects on their organizations stemming from Trump’s [cancellation](#) of 90 percent of all foreign aid contracts at the U.S. Agency for International Development, the termination of more than 1,600 positions, and the placement of almost all of USAID’s 10,000-strong workforce on administrative leave.

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The vice president of World Vision, Edward Brown, said his Christian charity would have to lay off a few thousand workers if the administration's policies weren't reversed, people in the room said.

Other leaders of charities said the Trump administration never paid them for providing lifesaving assistance that was supposed to be exempt from the freeze under a waiver issued by Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Some had secured exemptions for their aid programs only to be informed last week that Rubio had canceled the programs altogether, a major source of frustration.

"One by one, the aid leaders artfully explained the benefits of foreign assistance and what is being lost by ending it," said one person in the room, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a confidential meeting that has not been previously reported.

The gathering of about 35 people included a who's who of faith-based groups including World Relief, Samaritan's Purse, Christian Aid, Food for the Hungry, Compassion International, and National Association of Evangelicals. It also included the Muslim charity Islamic Relief.

The U.S. officials, led by USAID deputy administrator Pete Marocco, said they could not explain the rationale behind the terminations of any given program but insisted the cuts had been a success.

"Some of us looked at each other in disbelief," said an attendee. "We care about poor and hungry people and don't know how you can claim this as successful."

The polite objections of faith-based humanitarian executives pale in comparison to the fiery reactions of others in the aid community where concerns over the future of foreign assistance are existential. On Wednesday, demonstrators on Capitol Hill shouted, "Blood on his hands," as Marocco, Trump's chief dismantler of USAID, met with lawmakers in a closed-door briefing.

Inside the room, Marocco told lawmakers USAID was a "money-laundering scheme" that had lost its way and said he was examining whether foreign assistance was even constitutional, according to two congressional aides present in the meeting. He said he was considering making "multiple" criminal referrals to the Justice Department for alleged and unspecified crimes.

He also accused USAID of pushing LGBTQ issues in the developing world and fomenting the so-called Color Revolutions that toppled authoritarian governments in former Soviet states, a critique shared by far-right politicians in Russia and Hungary.

One lawmaker asked Marocco where he was on Jan. 6, 2021, a nod to [unconfirmed reports](#) that he was among the rioters in the Capitol building. Marocco declined to answer, saying it was not the topic of the meeting.

The State Department, USAID, Marocco and Gombis did not respond to requests for comment.

Pete Marocco, deputy administrator-designate at USAID, arrives to meet with members of Congress to discuss foreign assistance on Wednesday. (Kent Nishimura/Reuters)

Rubio, who empowered Marocco and approved his directives, was once a big proponent of foreign aid but since becoming secretary of state has harshly criticized USAID, saying it acts as a “global charity irrespective of whether it is in the national interest” and is guilty of “insubordination.” He has sought to allay concerns, telling critics and his own employees that “the United States is not walking away from foreign aid,” but it is hard to square that assurance with Marocco’s closed-door claims of “zeroing out” U.S. foreign aid and relinquishing responsibilities to the private sector.

The dissonant signals within the administration have angered Democrats, including Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, who asked how the administration could claim to be conducting a measured review of USAID while also moving to gut the agency’s workforce, of which he said 94 percent had been fired or “essentially permanently furloughed.”

“I just don’t think you can have it both ways,” Murphy said during a nomination hearing for officials including Christopher Landau, Trump’s pick for deputy secretary of state.

Landau, who served as U.S. ambassador to Mexico during Trump’s first term, said he believes that Trump “wants to make sure that we are doing the American taxpayers’ bidding by looking carefully at these programs and making sure that we separate the baby from the bathwater.”

Murphy chided Landau for saying he did not know what percentage of the U.S. humanitarian workforce had been eliminated or sidelined.

In an astonishingly short amount of time, Trump has radically transformed America’s foreign assistance apparatus in ways even his staunchest critics never imagined.

Last week, [teary-eyed aid workers](#) packed up their desks at the now-shuttered USAID headquarters in the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, while thousands of USAID personnel stationed overseas remain in limbo, unsure when they will become unemployed, when families will be forced from their homes and schools, and if they will be compensated for a move back to the United States.

The effects of the cuts on Christian aid groups, which receive millions of dollars from the U.S. government every year, have been stark. Catholic Relief Services anticipates layoffs and reductions to programs of up to 50 percent, according to a February [report](#) in the

National Catholic Reporter. The same month, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [laid off 50 staffers](#) in its migration and refugee services office, attributing it to a delay in reimbursements from the government.

World Vision declined to comment on future staffing changes. A person familiar with the matter said the organization “is continuing to assess the full extent of the impact based on a fluid situation.” If grants for lifesaving aid are not reinstated soon and the organization doesn’t receive pending payments, it will be “forced to furlough or terminate many staff across more than 40 countries,” the person said. The group’s expected layoffs were first reported by Devex.

The Supreme Court provided some hope to aid groups on Friday in a 5-4 ruling clearing the way for the Trump administration to restart nearly \$2 billion in payments for aid work already done. But Marocco made clear in his meeting with lawmakers that the U.S. government should get out of the philanthropy business, raising expectations for future showdowns at the Supreme Court.

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are also awaiting a notice from the Trump administration that it intends to collapse USAID under the auspices of the State Department, which has already taken over some of its functions, including public affairs communications. Only a few hundred people remain active in their jobs at USAID and not on administrative leave.

Career officials say those bureaucratic adjustments are much less important than the impact on the world’s most vulnerable.

A draft memo written by Nicholas Enrich, USAID’s acting assistant administrator for global health, estimated that ending programs to fight Ebola, polio, malaria and drug-resistant tuberculosis would result in the deaths of millions of children and cost the United States billions of dollars for the treatment of citizens infected with diseases that had been at bay in foreign countries.

The USAID suspension would lead to 71,000 to 166,000 malaria deaths annually, the memo said. Polio — on the cusp of being globally eradicated — would surge back, paralyzing around 200,000 people per year and rebounding to hundreds of millions of cases over the next 10 years, the memo added. Deadly hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola or Marburg could spread to around 28,000 cases.

The youngest would suffer most. Around 1 million children would not be treated for severe acute malnutrition, when the lack of food becomes so severe the body starts digesting its own tissues. And 2 million to 3 million children would die from completely preventable diseases because they would not receive vaccines, the memo said.

The memo foresees more communicable diseases reaching U.S. shores, causing health costs to spiral. Treating one patient with multidrug-resistant tuberculosis — the

prescription when a patient interrupts their drug regime — costs more than \$154,000 and can reach around half a million dollars if the strain is extensively drug-resistant.

The dramatic impacts have alarmed the elder statesmen of the GOP, who want to preserve the party's legacy on programs such as PEPFAR, the George W. Bush-era HIV prevention program estimated to have saved tens of millions of lives in Africa.

In February, former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice held a phone call with Rubio's top aide Mike Needham, her former student at Stanford, expressing concern that the evisceration of foreign aid wasn't impacting just USAID but also a range of lifesaving programs both Republicans and Democrats care about, said a GOP official familiar with the call.

A spokesperson for Rice declined to comment on the private call.

Unlike older Republicans, Marocco is much more skeptical of PEPFAR and has told lawmakers the program squanders billions of dollars through waste, fraud and abuse, but he did not provide examples.

While Marocco took heated criticism from Democrats during Wednesday's meeting, many of the leaders of faith-based groups praised the intent of the Trump administration's changes, particularly Ken Isaacs, vice president at Samaritan's Purse, according to two people in the meeting.

When asked for comment, Isaacs told The Post that the State Department "has a difficult job, and I appreciated that the director of foreign assistance took the time to hear from the many organizations represented during the meeting."

"I shared my long-standing belief that U.S. foreign assistance should be aligned with our national interest, which requires review and reform of the system," he added. "At the same time, I strongly encouraged the State Department to continue to provide life-saving humanitarian aid through foreign assistance."

Another attendee said Marocco's presentation left clear the scope of the Trump administration's ambitions and an intention to greatly reduce the U.S. role. "It was abundantly clear that they are reframing the entire enterprise of foreign aid as a kind of philanthropy the government doesn't need to be involved in," said a senior aid executive.

Abigail Hauslohner contributed to this report.