

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 2, 2025

The Honorable Marco Rubio  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20451

The Honorable Scott Bessent  
Secretary of the Treasury  
Department of the Treasury  
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Rubio and Secretary Bessent:

We write with urgent concerns about the lagging U.S. response to the devastating earthquake that struck Burma and neighboring Thailand on March 28, 2025. We ask that you make clear that U.S. sanctions will not impede providing critical relief in the wake of this natural disaster, and we urge you to organize a stronger emergency assistance effort as the death toll climbs and millions of displaced people endure both aftershocks from the earthquake and ongoing Burmese military airstrikes.

China, Russia, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand itself have reportedly all sent emergency teams and supplies to Burma. Meanwhile, it is unclear what, if any, emergency response the United States has marshaled thus far. This is the first test of the United States's ability to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the wake of the administration's foreign assistance review and dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). We are deeply concerned that the Administration's response is failing to meet both our moral and strategic objectives—sending a signal to countries around the world that our adversaries are more reliable and trustworthy than the United States.

While the United States has already missed a crucial 72-hour window during which rescuers are most likely to find earthquake survivors, Chinese rescue teams equipped with heavy machinery were first on the scene in the most affected areas.<sup>1</sup> Chinese as well as Russian and Belgian search-and-rescue teams were reportedly digging through wreckage on Sunday.<sup>2</sup> China has pledged \$14 million for Burma earthquake relief, reportedly sending 126 rescue workers and six dogs trained to sniff out trapped people, along with medical kits, drones, and earthquake detectors.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the Trump Administration has announced up to \$2 million in aid. The State Department said on Monday that a team from USAID would be traveling to Burma—but the United States reportedly does not intend to send a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART)

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Post, "Trump's USAID cuts cripple American response to Myanmar earthquake," Rebecca Tan, March 31, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/31/myanmar-earthquake-thailand-usaid-trump/>.

<sup>2</sup> New York Times, "Trump's U.S.A.I.D. Cuts Hobble Earthquake Response in Myanmar," Hannah Beech and Edward Wong, March 30, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/world/asia/myanmar-earthquake-usaid-cuts.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

as it typically would for a disaster of this scale.<sup>4</sup> For comparison, within a day of the major 2023 earthquake in Turkiye and Syria, the United States had a DART on the ground, and two urban search-and-rescue teams arrived soon after. DARTs include crisis specialist contractors who can deploy quickly, but the Trump Administration has fired many of them and has dissolved the infrastructure to support these teams.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, it is unclear how even this limited U.S. assistance will be implemented. On Friday, a small group of USAID officials were coordinating with Washington on an aid plan from an ad hoc situation room in Thailand, having recently sheltered from the earthquake, when they received final termination letters from the Trump Administration, precluding them from providing emergency assistance.<sup>6</sup> The Administration also reportedly placed on indefinite leave 14 of the 15 officials who made up “USAID Mission Burma” and is now rushing to bring several of them back.<sup>7</sup>

Even as the Administration has wittingly undercut our ability to efficiently save lives and promote U.S. interests, we call on the State Department and USAID to rapidly assess what the United States can still do for people in Burma, including with resources already in the region. For example, USAID typically has access to food and emergency supplies in warehouses in Dubai and Malaysia, including medical kits that can each serve the health care needs of 30,000 people for over three months.<sup>8</sup> The United States also reportedly has helicopters, planes, and other transport vehicles stationed in eastern Thailand that have been used in the past for disaster relief, including to airlift heavy machinery like excavators.<sup>9</sup>

We also urge the Department of the Treasury to expeditiously issue public documentation clearly authorizing all transactions related to earthquake relief efforts in Burma that would otherwise be prohibited by U.S. sanctions. There is precedent for this step: in February 2023, the United States issued a general license authorizing such activity in Syria following the deadly earthquake affecting that heavily sanctioned jurisdiction. Burma General License 3 presently authorizes transactions related to certain activities by nongovernmental organizations, like “humanitarian projects to meet basic human needs, including drought and flood relief.”<sup>10</sup> Through amendment or other public guidance, Treasury should remove any doubt that this applies to earthquake relief. The authorization should cover relief activities beyond those undertaken specifically by nongovernmental organizations. Treasury should also make any other changes necessary to give

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<sup>4</sup> Washington Post, “Trump’s USAID cuts cripple American response to Myanmar earthquake,” Rebecca Tan, March 31, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/31/myanmar-earthquake-thailand-usaid-trump/>.

<sup>5</sup> New York Times, “Trump’s U.S.A.I.D. Cuts Hobble Earthquake Response in Myanmar,” Hannah Beech and Edward Wong, March 30, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/world/asia/myanmar-earthquake-usaid-cuts.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Washington Post, “Trump’s USAID cuts cripple American response to Myanmar earthquake,” Rebecca Tan, March 31, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/31/myanmar-earthquake-thailand-usaid-trump/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> New York Times, “Trump’s U.S.A.I.D. Cuts Hobble Earthquake Response in Myanmar,” Hannah Beech and Edward Wong, March 30, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/world/asia/myanmar-earthquake-usaid-cuts.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Washington Post, “Trump’s USAID cuts cripple American response to Myanmar earthquake,” Rebecca Tan, March 31, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/31/myanmar-earthquake-thailand-usaid-trump/>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “General License No. 3: Certain Transactions in Support of Nongovernmental Organizations’ Activities,” March 25, 2021, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/56861/download?inline>.

general licenses practical effect in the post-earthquake context. Such clarity could help save lives given that logistics- and payments-related challenges could be especially difficult in this case.

To address our concerns about the U.S. response to this devastating earthquake, we ask that you please answer the following questions by April 9, 2025:

1. What immediate actions are you now prioritizing in Burma? Which specific parts of USAID or the Department of State will implement each step?
2. Why do you assess that China and Russia acted quickly to provide assistance?
3. Why did the Trump Administration decide not to send a DART in this case?
4. Is the United States still able to deploy DARTs in future crises given reported cuts to personnel and infrastructure that support them?
5. Is the United States still able to deploy certified search-and-rescue teams to disaster zones from Virginia and Southern California given reported cuts to their transportation contracts?<sup>11</sup>

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

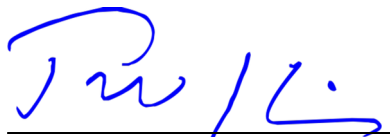
Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Banking,  
Housing, and Urban Affairs



Christopher A. Coons  
United States Senator



Tim Kaine  
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator

<sup>11</sup>New York Times, “Trump’s U.S.A.I.D. Cuts Hobble Earthquake Response in Myanmar,” Hannah Beech and Edward Wong, March 30, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/world/asia/myanmar-earthquake-usaid-cuts.html>.



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator