



September 24, 2021

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau,
Prime Minister of Canada,
80 Wellington Street,
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

I am writing to you on behalf of Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – one of Canada’s, and the world’s, leading independent emergency humanitarian medical organizations – to insist that, under your leadership, Canada must live up to its international obligations and its moral responsibilities, by placing urgency, respect for international humanitarian law and the needs of the world’s most vulnerable people at the heart of this country’s response to global crises.

As you begin your next term as Canada’s Prime Minister, you face a wide range of international emergencies, and need to decide how Canada will respond: armed conflicts and massive humanitarian needs in places like Afghanistan, Yemen and Central African Republic; the continuing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and other diseases; and record-high levels of displacement around the world as people flee violence, unrest and climate disasters in their home countries.

There is no time to wait. Right now, MSF teams are responding to crises in more than 70 countries around the world, and we see first-hand how global political failure continues to cause widespread suffering. As an international emergency medical organization that has provided exclusively independent, impartial and neutral humanitarian assistance since 1971, we provide lifesaving care to people affected by some of the world’s most complex emergencies. But it is the responsibility of governments like yours to find solutions to these crises, to prevent atrocities and to ensure international humanitarian law is upheld. It is governments who have the political power necessary to address the drivers of global humanitarian emergencies, and this is an inescapable responsibility that Canada must assume – in places such as Bangladesh, where Canada is already engaged in seeking solutions to the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis, but also in places where Canada has been conspicuous in its absence from such efforts, as in Ethiopia, Yemen and the displacement camps for refugees from Syria’s war.

Stand up for people affected by crises and who seek asylum across borders

The nature of global emergencies themselves is also changing. There are currently more people around the world who have been forcibly displaced from their homes than ever before in recorded history. Every day, MSF teams witness increased suffering and the terrible impact of restrictive border policies on people who have nowhere else to go. Rather than stem the mobility of migrants, these punitive practices force people to attempt ever more dangerous routes, resulting in greater vulnerability and harmful impacts on their physical health and mental wellbeing – as was a concern in 2020, when Canada closed its land borders to asylum claimants at the start of COVID-19. We call on

your government to respect the rights of people who seek refuge across borders and ensure their continued access to healthcare – even during a pandemic – not only by welcoming asylum seekers to this country, but by standing up for people in flight everywhere and advocating for states to uphold their humanitarian responsibilities under international law, including the Geneva Conventions and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

Recognize and act on the health and humanitarian impacts of climate change

Climate change has significant health and humanitarian consequences and is interacting with other global health threats such as COVID-19 to create connected, compounding and cascading crises. In many countries where we work, MSF is observing an accelerating pattern of one emergency closely followed by the next, with little time in between for communities and health systems to recover. Communities that are already vulnerable due to conflict, repression and neglect – the ones that MSF already assists – are also frequently the ones most vulnerable to the climate crisis. That is why, in addition to rapidly reducing carbon emissions at home, and urging other countries to do so too, Canada's climate efforts must include investing in the health infrastructure and response capacity of the world's most vulnerable regions in order to mitigate the worst humanitarian impacts of the climate crisis.

Address the deep global inequity in access to COVID-19 vaccines

These trends have been particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown that Canada cannot be complacent when it comes to ensuring that patients and health systems around the world have access to the medicines and vaccines they need. Throughout the pandemic, governments – including Canada's – spent billions of dollars on the research and development of COVID-19 vaccines. Yet despite these investments by governments on behalf of the citizens they represent, the world faces a deep global inequity in the international response to COVID-19, in which people in lower-income countries have been largely cut off from the world's limited supply of vaccines, and variants are able to develop and spread. Governments like yours had the opportunity to demand fair, affordable and global access to COVID-19 vaccines from the pharmaceutical companies who now control access to them, but didn't do so. This moral and public-health failure puts people everywhere, including Canada, at risk.

This is not a problem isolated to COVID-19. For decades, MSF's medical staff have witnessed people being denied treatment for deadly diseases because the medicines they need have been priced out of reach by profit-seeking pharmaceutical corporations, even when those medicines were discovered using public money, including here in Canada. In the short term, your government must continue to share more of Canada's own vast COVID-19 vaccine surplus with people around the world, but also promote an increase in global supply, including by supporting a proposal at the World Trade Organization to temporarily waive intellectual property rights on COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics until the pandemic comes to an end.

In the longer-term, as Canada looks to revitalize its biomanufacturing industry coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that any investments are aligned with global public health priorities and are conditional on patients around the world - including in Canada - having affordable, timely access to the medicines and vaccines that Canadians are paying to help produce.

That's why MSF launched a petition last year calling on Canada's government to take the simple step of adding accessibility and affordability conditions to its medical R&D funding agreements. Signed by 91,206 Canadians, it was delivered to Canada's Minister of Health last October; now, nearly one year later, it is time for your government to finally turn this ask into action.

As always, we look forward to productive, constructive dialogue with your government on how best to support people who are affected by global crises and how Canada can support the response to humanitarian emergencies around the world. We have high expectations of your government and look forward to working with you in the coming years.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Belliveau', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Joseph Belliveau,
Executive Director,
Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières Canada
Joe.Belliveau@toronto.msf.org