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A Casualty of USAID's Dismantling: The Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance

By Emily Shi



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Paper presented to:

Instructional Professor, Chad Broughton

Instructional Assistant, Saliem Shehadeh

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## Abstract

The Trump administration's gutting of USAID has dismantled US-driven bilateral humanitarian assistance, done historically through the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA). In this paper, I explore the implications of cutting BHA by explaining the history, bureaucracy, and principles that drive the agency's work. Furthermore, I articulate three case studies that reflect the unique role of BHA in responding to different types of disasters overseas. In doing so, I also aim to evaluate the legitimacy and validity behind common criticisms that have been levied against foreign aid as an institution and USAID. Twelve interviews with former USAID-affiliated officials and employees offer insider accounts of the type of rapid response and diplomatic coordination that will be lost in the future. While BHA's work in the humanitarian space is imperfect, the Trump administration's sudden dismantling of USAID has sown chaos in many regions of the world, directly contributing to human casualties and deaths. The future of humanitarian assistance as we know it hangs in the balance.

As the son of a United States diplomat, Ian Bennett spent much of his childhood overseas. In his career, he spent 27 years as a member of the US army as an artillery officer and then a joint planner. In his role as a joint planner working for the Department of Defense (DOD), his work supported exercises centered on natural disasters occurring overseas that were led by the USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Bennett felt drawn to supporting OFDA because of its true focus on disaster relief and mitigation of harm to civilians, which stood in contrast to other roles planners took on that focused on the DOD's war-fighting functions. Upon retirement from the army, he applied to join USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), the portion of the agency that now encompasses OFDA.<sup>1</sup>

Bennett was hired on November 17, 2024—just twelve days after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Within four months, Bennett completed most of his mandatory training for his role as a Personal Services Contractor (PSC) and was fired from USAID.<sup>2</sup> What happened to Bennett is a product of a series of attacks initiated by the Trump Administration to fully dismantle USAID.

On January 20, 2025, Trump issued an executive order halting foreign aid programs pending a 90-day review. A week later, he issued a stop-work order for existing grants and contracts related to foreign aid spending.<sup>3</sup> In February, the Trump administration announced a plan to eliminate over 90% of USAID's contracts and \$60 billion in assistance.<sup>4</sup> A month later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio officially announced the decision to slash 83% of USAID's

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Bennett, interview by Emily Shi, April 22, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Bennett.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Igoe // 24 January 2025, "Exclusive: State Department Issues Stop-Work Order on US Aid," Devex, January 24, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/exclusive-state-department-issues-stop-work-order-on-us-aid-109160>.

<sup>4</sup> -Eileen Knickmeyer, Associated Press Eileen Knickmeyer, and Associated Press, "USAID Workers Clear out Belongings after Mournful Final Visit to Agency under Federal Guard," PBS News, February 27, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/usaid-workers-clear-out-belongings-after-mournful-final-visit-to-agency-under-federal-guard>.

programs. Of 6,200 USAID contracts appropriated by Congress in the last budget approval, all but 1,000 were slashed and the remainder were announced to be transferred to the State Department.<sup>5</sup> Bennett characterized the way the Trump Administration treated USAID employees during this time as a “brutal attack, without any clarity or consideration for how to treat people.” “There was no care or compassion—it was done in a very amateurish and incompetent way for how to change, there was no thought given to what we would do instead of using USAID”, he said.<sup>6</sup>

Bennett is just one of over 5,600 formal USAID staff who were suddenly fired or placed on leave as a result of USAID’s dismantling. But USAID’s dismantling is not just about disrupted American careers: it is a symptom of a collapse of US foreign assistance that has begun to shape life-or-death outcomes for individuals across the world. Before Trump’s second administration, the United States was the largest donor to foreign assistance globally.<sup>7</sup> USAID’s cuts have reverberated across the field of humanitarian assistance, particularly because much of USAID’s work was accomplished through partnerships with local and global organizations, termed “implementing partners (IPs).” Beyond the employees affected, the most significant casualties of USAID’s dismantling are the people who used to receive assistance from USAID, including those facing conflict, poverty, and instability.

In providing assistance, USAID’s purview spans global health, development, governance, and more. In this paper, I focus on life-saving humanitarian aid coordinated by USAID’s BHA. Outcomes in sectors like democracy-building and disease prevention can be seen to an extent

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<sup>5</sup> Melody Schreiber, “Rubio Announces That 83% of USAID Contracts Will Be Canceled,” *NPR*, March 10, 2025, sec. Goats and Soda, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/03/10/g-s1-52964/rubio-announces-that-83-of-usaid-contracts-will-be-canceled>.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Bennett, interview.

<sup>7</sup> “USAID in Jeopardy: Cuts, Lost Trust, and a Threat to Development Priorities,” accessed May 15, 2025, <https://donortracker.org/publications/usaid-cuts-and-threats-to-oda-2025>.

now and modeled to estimate future impact, but the full extent of the harm will not be known for some time. By focusing on BHA, I aim to convey how the most immediate impacts of USAID's dismantling have already begun to surface in the months after Trump took office. At the same time, BHA's work has also become increasingly intertwined with health and development goals, which this paper will address as well.

Technically, the Trump administration rolled back cuts for specific programs focused on life-saving humanitarian assistance after initial cuts. On January 29<sup>th</sup>, Rubio issued a temporary waiver to allow life-saving humanitarian assistance.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. State Department later admitted that cuts to certain programs focused on life-saving assistance were made by mistake.<sup>9</sup> Connor stated that the scope of his portfolio covering USAID contracts and grants has drastically decreased, but that a common theme in programming that stayed was immediate humanitarian assistance. At the same time, humanitarian assistance has taken a hit, both because of explicit cuts and because of the difficulty of implementing and maintaining these waivers. Furthermore, in many instances, the damage had already been done. The temporary nature of these waivers, coupled with the dismantling of USAID, also means that life-saving assistance has and will continue to look drastically different after Trump took office. By examining the function of BHA, an agency that has effectively already been gutted, I hoped to understand the extent of these damages and what they meant for humanitarian assistance going forward.

To understand the consequences of BHA's dismantling, it is necessary to know the history and bureaucracy behind USAID and BHA. This paper begins with a history of USAID

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<sup>8</sup> "Emergency Humanitarian Waiver to Foreign Assistance Pause," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/emergency-humanitarian-waiver-to-foreign-assistance-pause/>.

<sup>9</sup> Elissa Miolene // 09 April 2025, "Trump Administration Admits Lifesaving Aid Was Accidentally Cut," *Devex*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/trump-administration-admits-lifesaving-aid-was-accidentally-cut-109830>.

and BHA, as well as an overview of the bureaucracy, structure, and humanitarian principles that guide BHA's function. Major criticisms have been raised in academic literature and by the Donald Trump administration regarding USAID's history. A section is dedicated to understanding these criticisms, while the rest of the paper will intersperse how these criticisms might apply to unique characteristics and cases of BHA as a subset of USAID focused primarily on life-saving assistance. Then, this paper will focus on case studies that represent how the "normal" BHA response in sudden-onset and longer-term crises has shifted. By looking at day-to-day BHA operations, these case studies aim to provide a metric to evaluate criticisms brought against USAID and to understand the immediate impacts of its dismantling. Looking towards the future, this paper will conclude by discussing how USAID-affiliated individuals have been responding to Trump and what the humanitarian assistance architecture built by BHA means for foreign aid and humanitarian assistance going forward.

Interviews I conducted with twelve individuals with insider perspectives due to current or former affiliations with USAID form the foundation of this analysis. Of the twelve, nine represent BHA staff and administration who were employed at the outset of the Trump administration. I also spoke with two previous administrative officials for USAID, Former Chief Economist from 2014-2015 Dr. Stephen O'Connell and Former Mission Director Dr. Andrew Sisson, to ground BHA's work in a larger context of USAID's goals. One interviewee Sarah N represents the perspective of a staffer at an implementing partner with USAID and has been heavily involved with advocacy efforts to counter the current administration's attacks. Six interviewees were granted anonymity due to concern for retaliation; pseudonyms denoted with an asterisk during first mention were used to refer to these individuals.

## **A Brief, Fraught History of USAID and Humanitarian Assistance**

On November 3, 1961, President John F Kennedy formally established the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as an independent federal agency to administer US foreign assistance. The practice of foreign assistance by the United States had far earlier origins, starting around 1794 when then Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton gave \$15,000 to displaced Haitian refugees during the Haitian Revolution.<sup>10</sup> However, the origin of modern US foreign assistance, focused on bilateral development assistance, is largely thought to have begun from President Truman's 1949 inaugural address, given one year into the four-year Marshall Plan in Europe. Therefore, the history and invention of foreign aid as we know it coupled development assistance with geopolitical goals; through rebuilding Europe, the U.S. government hoped to curtail the Communist threat from expanding.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout its history, USAID has undergone a series of priority shifts. In the 1970s, USAID moved from focusing on technical and capital assistance towards basic human needs including food and nutrition, population planning, health, and education. In the 1980s, aid turned to free markets, aiming to stabilize currencies and financial systems and promote economic growth. In the last two decades, USAID focused on sustainable development and democracy in the 1990s and then rebuilding after war in the 2000s.<sup>12</sup>

Alongside the priority shift towards basic human needs, policymakers also broadened the U.S.'s role specifically in international disaster aid. In 1964, the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) formed as an arm within USAID. A decade later in 1975, Congress added a

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<sup>10</sup> John Norris, *The Enduring Struggle: The History of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's Uneasy Transformation of the World* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021), chap. 1.

<sup>11</sup> "Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian," accessed April 20, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/marshall-plan>.

<sup>12</sup> "Records of the Agency for International Development (RG 286)," National Archives, October 24, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/related-records/rg-286>.

chapter called “International Disaster Assistance” to the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, which codified the U.S.’s role in disaster response and prevention.<sup>13</sup> In the years since, USAID’s disaster assistance arm has largely focused on operational expansion and technical refinement.<sup>14</sup>

### **Emergence of the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)**

Ironically, the first Trump administration catalyzed the initial formation of the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), which was formed by a merger between OFDA and the Offices of Food for Peace (FFP). In March 2017, Executive Order 13781, “Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch”, called to “improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of the executive branch”.<sup>15</sup> The plan dictated that the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) submit a proposed plan to this end, with an explicit inclusion of recommendations “to merge functions” when appropriate.<sup>16</sup> Following this, the OMB published memorandum M-17-22, which specifically recommended a reorganization of the headquarters bureaus and independent offices of USAID.<sup>17</sup> The executive order and memorandum, respectively, instigated a set of reforms branded as *Transformation at USAID*.

In the summer of 2017, USAID provided preliminary plans to the State Department and OMB. A year later, OMB published a government-wide reform plan with 32 reforms, including restructuring U.S. humanitarian assistance programs and changing USAID’s Washington, D.C.-

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<sup>13</sup> “OAH | ‘The Origins of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance,’” accessed April 19, 2025, <https://www.oah.org/tah/february-4/the-origins-of-u-s-foreign-disaster-assistance/>.

<sup>14</sup> “OFDA/USAID: A Critical Juncture Analysis” October 2, 2006, [https://web.archive.org/web/20061002233539/http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADC353.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20061002233539/http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADC353.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> “Executive Order 13781—Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch | The American Presidency Project,” accessed April 19, 2025, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-13781-comprehensive-plan-for-reorganizing-the-executive-branch>.

<sup>16</sup> “Executive Order 13781—Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch | The American Presidency Project.”

<sup>17</sup> “The Trump Administration’s Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations,” legislation, accessed April 19, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN10920>.

based bureau structure.<sup>18</sup> While language centered around increasing efficiency of government programs may ring reminders of DOGE, the specific establishment of the BHA in 2020 actually cited a goal of elevating US humanitarian assistance.<sup>19</sup>

The Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance was formed by removing FFP and OFDA out of the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA) and combining them into one consolidated bureau. The two primary reasons cited by USAID for its creation were 1) removing duplication of efforts and therefore removing the distinction between food and nonfood aid to respond more quickly and effectively to emergencies, and 2) creating a more unified and prominent voice on humanitarian assistance on the global stage.<sup>20</sup>

While this decision was not made without controversy and debate, it fell in line with the historical evolution of USAID as well as recommendations from previous administrations. In the late 1990s, prior to a reorganization that led to the formation of the DCHA, a separate Bureau for Humanitarian Response existed. Furthermore, under Barack Obama's administration, an internal USAID review process had already recommended a consolidation of OFDA and FFP within USAID, which they deferred to the incoming administration to decide.<sup>21</sup> While members of the humanitarian community largely viewed this change as a positive step, some raised skepticism, which mostly pertained to concerns regarding a potential shrinkage of US in-grown food aid and a potential shift away from longer-term aid.<sup>22</sup> Former BHA Official Anne\* stated that combining food assistance with the other disaster management expertise of OFDA facilitated the

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<sup>18</sup> Office of Management and Budget, "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century" (The White House, June 2018), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Government-Reform-and-Reorg-Plan.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> "Transformation at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)," legislation, 10, accessed April 19, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45779>.

<sup>20</sup> "Transformation at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)," 10.

<sup>21</sup> "Transformation at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)," 10.

<sup>22</sup> "Transformation at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)," 11.

coordination required for the “Cluster Approach” to humanitarian assistance, a system set up by the UN to organize humanitarian actors into core sectors to support a crisis response.<sup>23</sup>

### **Bureaucracy Behind the BHA**

The BHA is a unique arm in USAID due to its organization and capacity to respond to short-term, urgent humanitarian disasters that arise. Upon a formal “Declaration of Humanitarian Need” issued either by the Chief of Mission in an affected country or the U.S. ambassador, the BHA uses a Response Management System (RMS) to direct the ensuing response.<sup>24</sup> Critical arms of emergency response include Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs) and Response Management Teams (RMTs). DARTs comprise a team of specialists deployed overseas to assess and manage disaster situations, whereas RMTs provide leadership and operational support from within Washington, DC. DARTs existed prior to the merger between OFDA and FFP as a type of unit under OFDA. Another newer form of response is an Enhanced Bureau Response (EBR), which sits between the regional team that a USAID would have in countries in non-emergent situations and DARTs.<sup>25</sup>

Due to the nature of short-term and crisis-based humanitarian assistance, BHA’s global presence and response shift based on the needs of a given year. In fiscal year 2022, BHA’s global presence involved one headquarters, six regional offices, 14 liaison offices, 32 countries with full-time BHA staff, and five emergency stockpiles. \$11.9 billion was allocated to 79 different countries and territories, with six DARTs and RMTs activated to respond to: the Venezuela regional crisis; complex emergencies in Afghanistan, northern Ethiopia, Syria, and

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<sup>23</sup> Anne\*, interview by Emily Shi, Phone Call, April 18, 2025.

<sup>24</sup> “2 FAM 060 INTERNATIONAL DISASTER AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE,” accessed April 19, 2025, <https://fam.state.gov/fam/02fam/02fam0060.html>.

<sup>25</sup> “2 FAM 060 INTERNATIONAL DISASTER AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE.”

Ukraine; and flooding in Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> Complex emergencies refer to crises that are characterized by multiple compounded factors, including weather crises, food crises, and conflict. In fiscal year 2023, the number of headquarters, regional offices, and liaison offices remained the same but the number of countries with full-time BHA staff grew to 47 and the number of emergency stockpiles grew to 7. \$9.9 billion was allocated to 81 different countries and territories, with 11 DARTs and RMTs activated to respond to: complex emergencies in Afghanistan, Haiti, northern Ethiopia, the south Caucasus, Sudan, and Ukraine; the Venezuela regional crisis; flooding in Libya and Pakistan; earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, and an earthquake in Morocco.

The people who work to support these responses are brought onto BHA with numerous different hiring mechanisms. In addition to traditional direct staff who can be operationally or programmatically funded, a significant number of BHA staff are comprised of two types of contractors. In 2022, over 70% of BHA comprised of Personal Services Contractors (PSCs) and Institutional Support Contractors (ISCs).<sup>27</sup> PSCs work directly for USAID, whereas ISCs are employees of companies contracted by USAID for services; these contractors largely function as regular staff. USAID has garnered criticism over its reliance on a contract-based hiring system. In 2023, Senators Edward Markey, Elizabeth Warren, and Bernie Sanders wrote a letter to then-USAID Administrator Samantha Power expressing concern, to which Power cited a staffing crisis threatening the agency's priorities.<sup>28</sup> The Trump administration's first round of furloughs

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<sup>26</sup> "Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance - Annual Report for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 - World | ReliefWeb," June 16, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/bureau-humanitarian-assistance-annual-report-fiscal-year-fy-2022>.

<sup>27</sup> "2 FAM 060 INTERNATIONAL DISASTER AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE."

<sup>28</sup> Michael Igoe // 12 September 2023, "Lawmakers Question USAID's Reliance on Temporary Contractors," Devex, September 12, 2023, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/lawmakers-question-usaid-s-reliance-on-temporary-contractors-106171>.

and layoffs targeted up to 500 ISCs, or 40% of the team comprising BHA.<sup>29</sup> BHA also consists of locally employed staff supported by their home mission.

Two different funding mechanisms support USAID's humanitarian and development work. These mechanisms, which are called “acquisition and assistance,” include grants, cooperative agreements, and contracts, which make up over 85% of USAID’s work.<sup>30</sup>

A Former Acquisitions & Assistance Specialist for Connor\* described acquisition as contracts that USAID provides private companies and assistance as a more traditional form of no-strings-attached grants to humanitarian implementing partners.<sup>31</sup> For BHA specifically, he estimated that around 40% of assistance work went to rapid-onset emergencies and 60% went to longer-term work, such as building resilience.

One PSC Field Desk Operations Officer, Zoe\*, explained that BHA response strategy uses a “four corners” approach, comprised of BHA DC staff, DC-based implementing partners, BHA field staff, and field-based partners or subgrantees. BHA will communicate with field-based partners, followed by BHA DC staff, who coordinate with DC-based implementing partners. According to Brown, this response structure stood in contrast to when crises were managed by OFDA, which had field-heavy communications.

## **Principles Grounding BHA’s Work and Guiding Its Evolution**

Behind all the complex logistics guiding BHA operations, its work aims to be grounded in core humanitarian principles. Four basic principles adopted by the UN General Assembly

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<sup>29</sup> Elissa Miolene // 28 January 2025, “Scoop: USAID Furloughs Hundreds of Contractors from Humanitarian Bureau,” Devex, January 28, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/scoop-usaid-furloughs-hundreds-of-contractors-from-humanitarian-bureau-109196>.

<sup>30</sup> Humentum, “USAID’s Acquisition and Assistance Strategy,” March 2023, <https://humentum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AA-Strategy-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Connor\*, interview by Emily Shi, Zoom Call, April 20, 2025.

govern the work of all actors working in the humanitarian sphere. These principles are humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Humanity emphasizes addressing human suffering wherever found, neutrality is the responsibility not to take sides, impartiality refers to carrying out action solely based on need, and independence means that humanitarian action should be autonomous from political or military objectives.<sup>32</sup> These four principles, as well as references to the Geneva Convention, International Humanitarian Law, Refugee Law, Human Rights Law, Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles, are all in the first few pages of “pocket guides” issued to all USAID staff serving on DARTs.<sup>33</sup>

While BHA primarily focused on humanitarian aid, which is often considered short-term in nature, its work also increasingly evolved to include preparation for the long term because of an increasing number of protracted crises, including climate change. The Bureau included Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience (ER4) programs aimed at addressing crises such as natural disasters that have been increasing in duration, frequency, and intensity.<sup>34</sup> The framework for ER4 aligns with a 2012 Resilience Policy of USAID requiring joint collaboration between development and humanitarian actors.<sup>35</sup> One component of ER4 programming is Resilience Food Security Activities (RSFAs), which were BHA's primary resilience-focused activities that would be multisectoral and require investments across many years.<sup>36</sup> Another reason this work was multisector and interdisciplinary is that many of the countries vulnerable to changes brought by climate change, like natural disasters, also face compounded conflict and poor economic conditions. In the fiscal year 2022, \$715.4 million of BHA funding went to ER4 activities, and

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<sup>32</sup> USAID, “DART Pocket Guide,” January 2024.

<sup>33</sup> USAID.

<sup>34</sup> “Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance - Annual Report for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 - World | ReliefWeb.”

<sup>35</sup> “Strategic Framework for Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience ER4,” October 2022, <https://resources.peopleinneed.net/documents/1349-bha--2022--early-recovery--risk-reduction-and-resilience--er4--framework.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> “Strategic Framework for Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience ER4.”

\$194.3 million went to integrating ER4 with active humanitarian response.<sup>37</sup> The amount of funding towards ER4 activities expanded in fiscal year 2023 to \$763 million for ER4 activities and over \$124 million for integrating ER4 components with humanitarian response.<sup>38</sup>

Shawnee Hoover, one of the individuals I spoke to, worked in the thick of these multisectoral issues. Her work focused on resilience, climate, and the Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) nexus, an approach proposed by the UN in 2016 for addressing populations affected by crisis that focuses on addressing key root causes and decreasing risks and vulnerabilities.<sup>39</sup> For seven years, she worked on these cross-cutting issues from BHA’s policy team, leading engagements with G7, G20, and the World Bank. She then moved towards the technical end as a Senior Organizational Learning Advisor. Hoover contacted me to speak from an interview request message sent in a USAID chat. “I reached out to you because I personally feel that we were making really important and historic progress within BHA,” she said. “I felt it was going to be really influential and change the overall landscape of humanitarian assistance and human development.”

Hoover was responsible for tracking BHA work to find better ways to integrate all of the work done across BHA. It. This integration adhered to the HDP nexus, which she articulated as a large shift from the past, when emergency needs and longer-term needs were kept separate. She described how the high cost of humanitarian assistance, coupled with the rise of complex crises, makes this separation insufficient for addressing problems.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance - Annual Report for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 - World | ReliefWeb.”

<sup>38</sup> USAID’s BHA, “Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance Annual Report, Fiscal Year 2023,” June 20, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/bureau-humanitarian-assistance-annual-report-fiscal-year-fy-2023>.

<sup>39</sup> “Humanitarian-Development- Peace- Nexus Approaches,” UNDP, accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-approaches>.

<sup>40</sup> Shawnee Hoover, interview by Emily Shi, Signal Call, April 24, 2025.

Before intentional work to guide BHA's work to suit the HDP nexus, integrating humanitarian assistance and development aid still happened, but were often driven through bottom-up policymaking at the field level.

We had that awesome BHA staff who would be like, "Oh my god, we're just applying a band-aid over and over and over again. I'm going to walk over across the mission into the agriculture and economic growth office, sit down, and be like, 'don't you guys have some programming adjacent to this area that we can start collaborating on?'" We know that happens all the time. The problem is, over the decades, it has been stuck in this ad hoc personality based and driven success.<sup>41</sup>

The short-term nature of humanitarian assistance staffing posed a major problem for the long-term success of these collaborations, Hoover said. "It falls apart because there's no infrastructure, there's no policy and guidance behind it."<sup>42</sup> When the HDP nexus came out, Hoover heard criticisms from the academic community that this broad policy guidance was too top-down to be effective. "Well, what's really missing here is that USAID voice," she said. "From our staff in the past, they will absolutely be the first ones to tell you that we actually need more top-down support, because so much of it is being driven from the bottom up."<sup>43</sup>

Given that the HDP-nexus exists as a broad framework in humanitarian aid, I asked Hoover what set BHA apart in addressing these issues to contribute to historic progress. "The whole world had been moving in this direction, but USAID was actually cracking the nut at the operational, programmatic level, which no other donor was doing," she said. Hoover also characterized BHA as uniquely fit to focus on collaboration in cross-cutting issues because of its history in merging OFDA, which focused on humanitarian assistance, and FFP, which performed development food assistance. About the merger, Hoover stated that "it brought together two extremely different cultures and married them to one another, an introvert [OFDA, which was

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<sup>41</sup> Hoover.

<sup>42</sup> Hoover.

<sup>43</sup> Hoover.

more technical and operationally focused] and an extrovert [FFP, which was more policy-focused].”<sup>44</sup> These conversations paid off. “We had a very unique perspective based on the very real and very intimate conversations that we can have within our own staff and bureau because we all trust each other internally,” Hoover said.<sup>45</sup>

### **“Radical Left Lunatics”: USAID and Critique from Many Directions**

Having established the principles dictating USAID and BHA action, it is also critical to acknowledge that the agency and foreign aid as a broader entity have been subject to scrutiny from both sides of the political spectrum and academic literature. The criticisms that led to the dismantling of USAID are in some ways unique from historical scrutiny. President Trump made a statement that USAID was run by “radical left lunatics” and had “tremendous fraud” without elaborating.<sup>46</sup> In a social media post, he later accused the agency of stealing “BILLIONS OF DOLLARS”.<sup>47</sup> The White House published a list of examples of projects they considered “waste” and “abuse,” which mostly targeted the rhetoric and ideology behind projects. Examples listed included \$1.5 million to “advance diversity equity and inclusion in Serbia’s workplace business communities” and millions to “EcoHealth Alliance — which was involved in research at the Wuhan lab.” The examples listed by the White House target only a subset of projects within USAID, yet the entire agency was dismantled. Since the examples in this paper focus on BHA, which was not directly involved with the “waste” examples provided by the Trump administration, it does not directly address these critiques. However, examining the inner

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<sup>44</sup> Hoover.

<sup>45</sup> Hoover.

<sup>46</sup> Schreiber, “Rubio Announces That 83% of USAID Contracts Will Be Canceled.”

<sup>47</sup> Donald J. Trump [@realDonaldTrump], “<https://t.co/UeyP7NHjAo>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, February 6, 2025, <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1887543203953275347>.

operations and functioning of the work at BHA allows for an assessment of “fraud” and “waste” present in the agency.

A broader implication of Trump’s dismantling of USAID is this administration’s ideological preference in spending money that is “not aligned with American interests”, as written in Trump’s initial executive order.<sup>48</sup> From the other end of the political spectrum, USAID has been criticized as “the soft-power arm of US imperialism, cloaked in the language of humanitarian aid and development”.<sup>49</sup> These opposite criticisms create tension in the work performed by USAID, as well as the way that employees have rationalized and defended their own values.

Former Chief Economist of USAID Dr. Stephen O’Connell characterized the primary motivation of USAID as attaining soft power, which he defined as the power to obtain voluntary collaboration towards aims that the US would embrace. However, he emphasized that this motivation was not mutually exclusive with other objectives of morality and security. “I would tend to put morality under the soft power umbrella,” he said. “It’s almost like the golden rule: if you want to have friends, do unto others as you would like them to do unto you.”

Nonetheless, the concept of aid as a tool for the US to gain soft power seemed like it could be at odds with principles of neutrality and impartiality. In *The Enduring Struggle: The History of USAID and America’s Uneasy Transformation of the World*, John Norris writes that “there really is no such thing as a truly neutral foreign aid program, even where the intentions are purely humanitarian”.<sup>50</sup> In asking respondents what they thought about criticism of the

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<sup>48</sup> “Executive Order 13781—Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch | The American Presidency Project.”

<sup>49</sup> By, “The Eclipse of USAID by Digital Imperialism,” accessed May 18, 2025, <https://jacobin.com/2025/02/usa-id-digital-imperialism-trump-tech>.

<sup>50</sup> Norris, *The Enduring Struggle*, 107.

politicization of aid, they universally acknowledged its existence. As street-level bureaucrats with the ability to influence the engagement of USAID with local partners on-the-ground, though, they also spoke to using this recognition to influence how they approached their work.

Many interviewees described their engagement as searching for ways to rectify their values with an obligation to as representatives of an agency of the U.S. government funded by tax dollars. Though he noted some historical exceptions, Former Mission Director Andrew Sisson stated: “the places where I worked, I was always looking for that sweet spot where our interests matched theirs.” This process involved a rigorous needs assessment. “That’s one of the great things about being in the kind of position I was in—I could talk to almost anybody...from the President’s top advisor or cabinet ministers to religious leaders, to civil society leaders, to college students and farmers and mothers,” Sisson said. “That analytic process was wonderful, and it hopefully in general led to a more informed set of choices.” Sisson also described working for USAID as an opportunity to inform foreign policy in a positive way. “I wanted to be an American diplomat, a representative of the US overseas, and ideally a good part of that and not the bad or objectionable part,” Sisson said. “That mindset within USAID is common.”

One factor driving my interest in disaster assistance specifically was that it seemed removed from objectionable aspects of US foreign policy engagement. Interviewees echoed this same statement. While development assistance entailed longer-term goals with priority-setting from local governments and the United States, Sisson described immediate humanitarian assistance as less politicized, citing previous assistance to North Korea, Cuba, and Iran. Regarding BHA, Anne\* stated, “We really did try to be the bureau that was the most values-based.” BHA’s grounding in humanitarian principles dictated their actions, even if they had limitations as a part of the U.S. government. “Through successive administrations, we really did

use the funding for humanitarian assistance in a way that I think was consistent with what was intended, which is needs-based for an emergency,” she said. “If there were other longer-term foreign policy objectives, we used different streams of funding.”

Some have argued that multilateral aid may be more effective way of providing assistance since it is less politicized.<sup>51</sup> Grace\*, Former Deputy Team Leader for BHA’s South & Central Asia Team, who used to work for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) pushed back against this point. “My frustration with multilaterals is that it would be impossible to have some real sort of top-down authority, you have the Secretary General, you have your agencies. They all have their mandates, and they sort of work within that,” she said. “But in emergency responses for example, a lot of UN agency efforts are structured around fundraising, and it can really feel like agencies start to pursue funds, to get more money and increase their footprint, not necessarily to deliver more expertise,” she said. Though this fact didn’t mean that multilateral organizations were not concerned about the quality of programming, Grace explained that foreign aid’s imperfections couldn’t be solved by transitioning from bilateral to multilateral aid. “Everything is political and driven by interests that don’t always align with altruism,” she said. Despite these imperfections, Grace felt excited to enter into a role at BHA for an opportunity to advocate for emergencies from the donor side.

Beyond the distinction between US foreign policy interests and humanitarian principles, some criticisms target the concept of foreign aid itself. Dambisa Moyo’s book *Dead Aid* made the provocative argument that the foreign aid industry was malignant and responsible for hindering development in Africa. Moyo distinguishes between humanitarian or emergency aid, dispersed in response to calamities, charity-based aid, and systemic or bilateral aid. She directs

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<sup>51</sup> Axel Dreher et al., “Bilateral or Multilateral? International Financial Flows and the Dirty-Work Hypothesis,” *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 4 (October 2022): 1932–46, <https://doi.org/10.1086/718356>.

the primary criticisms of aid as malignant against systemic aid, the transfer of billions of dollars directly to governments. Moyo touches upon problems with emergency aid—including poor implementation, high costs, and strings that may come attached—but acknowledges its “obvious and fundamental merits”.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to place discussions of BHA in this broader context given its increasing integration with longer-term aid.

### **Three Case Studies in Disaster Relief**

In order to fully contextualize the bureaucracy behind the BHA, understand what has been lost with the gutting of USAID, and ascertain to what degree criticisms of foreign aid are relevant to this agency, it is necessary to comprehend the details of how BHA normally functioned. As such, this paper will cover three case studies that demonstrate the functioning of the BHA pre-Trump 2.0. The first two case studies—earthquake response and the famine in South Sudan—were selected as emblematic of BHA’s response to the highest-profile disasters, aligning with the agency's delineated goals. The last case study focuses on the complex emergencies facing Mozambique, where BHA has supported longer-term resilience building, coupled with emergency needs. These case studies offer an explicit means of comparison in a pre-2025 and post-2025 world. For earthquake response, I compare BHA’s response to 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Morocco with the 2025 response in Myanmar. The crises in Sudan and Mozambique are ongoing, and we can therefore ascertain the current impacts of BHA’s gutting.

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<sup>52</sup> Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*, 1. American paperback ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

## Earthquake Response in Turkey versus Myanmar

On March 28<sup>th</sup> at 12:50 am local time, a 7.7-magnitude earthquake struck Myanmar, causing an initial death toll of over 2000 that was expected to continue to rise—the first major global emergency since the Trump administration’s announced cuts to USAID.<sup>53</sup> Trump stated that the United States would still provide help. The Saturday after the early Monday morning earthquake, a three-person USAID assessment team was sent to Myanmar.<sup>54</sup> Two days after the earthquake, the US pledged \$2 million in foreign assistance, which later increased to \$9 million.<sup>55</sup> By contrast, USAID sent over 225 people when an earthquake of similar magnitude struck Turkey and \$185 million in assistance in 2023. Within 24 hours, the U.S. had dispatched two military flights of DARTs with 159 Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) personnel, 12 rescue dogs, and 170,000 pounds of specialized equipment. Throughout the response, BHA partners provided critical health care services, emergency food and shelter assistance, safe drinking water to dampen the spread of disease, search-and-rescue support, and winter supplies. Since 3.3 million Syrian refugees resided in Turkey, BHA also provided emergency food assistance to refugees living in camps.<sup>56</sup> These numbers paint a stark contrast of the magnitude of the response but understanding how the BHA response functions on the ground in the aftermath of emergencies sheds light on all that has been lost.

Former BHA Operations Manager Haley Rotheram was one of the first members of BHA to land on the ground in Turkey after the earthquake hit. I asked Rotheram for a play-by-play on

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<sup>53</sup> Hannah Beech and Edward Wong, “Trump’s U.S.A.I.D. Cuts Hobble Earthquake Response in Myanmar,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2025, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/world/asia/myanmar-earthquake-usaid-cuts.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Beech and Wong.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Wright Ripley Will, “US Aid Cuts Leave Quake-Hit Myanmar ‘Abandoned,’ Humanitarian Experts Say,” CNN, April 10, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/10/asia/myanmar-quake-usaid-trump-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>56</sup> USAID’s BHA, “BHA Annual Report FY2023.”

initiating a response from her perspective. In the early hours of earthquake response Rotheram focused on making sure everyone, herself included, could enter the country to activate a response. “We landed in Adana, and the airport is full of use—USAR teams from around the world are sleeping with their dogs, waiting for their orders,” she said. “There was no way for a country that was just hit by a major earthquake to process visas in their normal way...I’m negotiating with customs officers on the ground.”<sup>57</sup> After setting up an operations center, Rotheram focused on gaining access to a Turkish joint Air Force base with the US military so that US helicopters could deliver supplies. Procuring supplies in a physical environment that had been demolished required harnessing personal connections. Rotheram gave an example of a type of conversation she’d have on the ground:

Do you know someone who operates a water truck? *Yeah, he lives in this part of the country.*  
Okay great, can he actually drive his truck to where the Urban Search and Rescue Team is?  
*No, that road is completely demolished.* Okay, let’s find someone else.

Her experience illustrates the level of detailed coordination required to respond when chaos strikes.

In addition to personal connections, a crucial component of BHA’s capacity to respond to emergencies like earthquakes is through relationships with expert organizations. The Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) capacities referenced by Rotheram are a unique aspect of BHA. Historically, BHA has had a close relationship with both the US Forest Service and firefighter agencies, including contracts with the Los Angeles County Fire Department and Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams. Both teams were deployed in the wake of the Turkey/Syria earthquakes to the Turkey-based DART, but both

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<sup>57</sup> Haley Rotheram, interview by Emily Shi, Zoom Call, April 24, 2025.

contracts were cancelled by the Trump administration.<sup>58</sup> Rotheram articulated that international USAR teams are critical in situations like earthquakes because disasters can entirely drain the local response capacity.<sup>59</sup> The United States played a unique role in these responses because it is an internationally recognized leader in USAR. This recognition has been built up by individual members of BHA. Rotheram and Zoe, who also supported the Turkey response, both referenced one colleague in BHA operations as the founder of an international cadre of USAR teams. “There’s a guy for the USAR and fire response named Dewey who literally has trained the world,” Zoe said. “He started in Forest Service. He *is* the institutional knowledge globally, and you just fired him, you don’t have access to him.”<sup>60</sup>

In the United States’ absence, the response to the earthquake in Myanmar was largely led by China, with countries like China, India, and Russia also deploying USAR teams.<sup>61</sup> But the United States’ role in building up regional USAR capabilities was a large reason why response capacity in Myanmar could be maintained, Zoe said.<sup>62</sup> Historically, regional USAR teams would’ve looked to the US as a leader. “I can’t speak for the capacity of every other USAR team but I think ours really does show the top example of how you operate a base camp for a USAR team in a disaster zone,” Rotheram said. Aside from the expertise and skill level of US USAR teams, Zoe highlighted the devastating effects of having “one less asset” in the global response. “When you’re looking at people sitting in rubble, if you aren’t there, you don’t get them out

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<sup>58</sup> Rebecca Wright Ripley Will, “US Aid Cuts Leave Quake-Hit Myanmar ‘Abandoned,’ Humanitarian Experts Say,” CNN, April 10, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/10/asia/myanmar-quake-usaid-trump-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Rotheram, interview.

<sup>60</sup> Zoe\*, interview.

<sup>61</sup> “As Trump Guts Foreign Aid, China and Others Lead Myanmar Earthquake Response,” NBC News, April 1, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/myanmar-earthquake-rescue-trump-usaid-china-rcna198818>.

<sup>62</sup> Zoe\*, interview.

within 48 hours, you're just recovering bodies," Zoe said." People died because we didn't have those contracts [with USAR]."<sup>63</sup>

Response time is of the essence in sudden disasters like earthquakes. USAID also had the resources and institutional support to respond swiftly to emergencies that arose. Permanent USAID staff are stationed in regular regional offices in addition to regional offices ready to offer support within their time zone. "We had people in Bangkok and the Philippines, who, within hours, could've been able to travel to Myanmar in the wake of an earthquake," Anne said. "USAID would have convened a meeting on our response strategy probably first thing in the morning, we would have a team put together ready to deploy probably by that afternoon, arriving in country," Connor\* said.<sup>64</sup> "The entire humanitarian infrastructure would activate, fly into Myanmar, and begin response and recovery."

In the aftermath of the Myanmar earthquake, over 3,300 people were killed and 4,800 were injured. The three experienced aid workers sent to Myanmar to address the situation received termination emails after getting to the region, adding to the hundreds who would've responded but were terminated earlier.<sup>65</sup>

We have group chats and we all saw the earthquake in Myanmar. I think every single person knew that we normally would've responded. All of us were like, okay, we are changing our weekend plans...And then to just sit there and know that there's nothing we can do is terrible. This is everyone's passion.<sup>66</sup>

## **Famine Response in Sudan**

In April 2023, a civil war broke out between two major rival factions in Sudan, the government's Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

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<sup>63</sup> Zoe\*.

<sup>64</sup> Connor\*, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Beech and Wong, "Trump's U.S.A.I.D. Cuts Hobbles Earthquake Response in Myanmar."

<sup>66</sup> Zoe\*, interview.

Estimates of the death toll vary from 20,000 to 150,000.<sup>67</sup> A UN fact-finding mission in September 2024 concluded that the two parties have committed an “appalling range of harrowing human rights violations and international crimes,” including attacks targeting civilians, mass sexual violence, arbitrary arrest, and torture.<sup>68</sup> Former BHA official Anne\* stated that the agency’s top priorities from a humanitarian perspective were Gaza and Sudan.<sup>69</sup>

In response to the extreme humanitarian need, estimated as 24.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023, 57% higher than the projected estimate before the conflict, BHA activated a DART based in Nairobi, Kenya, and an RMT to coordinate a response. The UN World Food Programme (WFP), a BHA partner, provided cash and in-kind food assistance to over 1.8 million people in 2023.<sup>70</sup> Five months into the conflict, Foreign Service Officer Bo\* first came to Nairobi to lead the DART from August to November, followed by providing support from the DC side for a few months. The most important priority of the BHA approach to this crisis was to get life-saving assistance to areas in greatest need, which often were located behind conflict lines.<sup>71</sup>

Working towards this goal required extensive negotiation in a politically complex environment. Every form of humanitarian assistance must be coordinated and approved through the Sudanese Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), which can be a highly bureaucratic and difficult process. BHA knew that the HAC would not approve assistance going to some areas. “The public reasoning is that you don’t want food supplies, fuel, going to the enemy,” Bo said.

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<sup>67</sup> “How Many Have Died in Sudan’s Civil War? Satellite Images and Models Offer Clues,” accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.science.org/content/article/how-many-have-died-sudan-s-civil-war-satellite-images-and-models-offer-clues>.

<sup>68</sup> “Sudan: UN Fact-Finding Mission Outlines Extensive Human Rights Violations, International Crimes, Urges Protection of Civilians,” OHCHR, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/sudan-un-fact-finding-mission-outlines-extensive-human-rights-violations>.

<sup>69</sup> Anne\*, interview.

<sup>70</sup> USAID’s BHA, “BHA Annual Report FY2023.”

<sup>71</sup> Bo\*, interview by Emily Shi, Signal Call, April 20, 2025.

Prior to the conflict, the Sudanese Armed Forces controlled all government institutions, including the HAC. Aid obstruction, therefore, was used as a political weapon. “The HAC is its intelligence community,” Bo said. “Even though in theory they coordinate humanitarian assistance through the HAC, it’s a form of control. They investigate humanitarian workers and follow them around and intimidate them.”

Supporting partners and alleviating the crisis would not have been possible without extensive US government involvement in access negotiations and diplomatic efforts, Bo said. The US government convened a series of international negotiations over the Sudan crisis. Two initiatives for mediation occurred in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in May 2023. While some high-level commitments were made on humanitarian access, none materialized.<sup>72</sup> In late October, talks resumed. USAID approached these negotiations seeking smaller and more discrete commitments. “We wanted them to be able to talk to each other frankly,” Bo said. Bo’s experience in Jeddah highlights the progress of these efforts.

In May, I was not there, but just from everything I heard...it was shuttle diplomacy. They were staying in different hotels in different parts of the city, and the US delegation, the Saudis, just like, drove back and forth, right? They would not talk to each other; they would not meet...But by November, it was weird, we all stayed in the same hotel, and, you know, we'd see everyone at breakfast. It was like, ‘Hey, these are the generals that are like people are fighting each other, but, you know, they're here, living in this hotel with me.’ It’s bizarre, it was still difficult, but at least there was dialogue.<sup>73</sup>

The biggest goal USAID approached this series of negotiations with was to commit to ongoing dialogue in a Humanitarian Forum led by OCHA (the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). The rationale for higher-level diplomatic negotiations was to overcome checkpoints where humanitarian aid efforts were stuck, such as the holdup of

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<sup>72</sup> Arab Center Washington DC (ACW), “The Failure of the Jeddah and IGAD Mediation Efforts for Sudan,” Arab Center Washington DC, April 15, 2025, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-failure-of-the-jeddah-and-igad-mediation-efforts-for-sudan/>.

<sup>73</sup> Bo\*, interview.

certain supplies or the lack of permission for NGOs to respond to outbreaks of diseases like cholera. After meeting once in Geneva in August, RSF and SAF did not agree to reconvene. The reason that the US could engage at all was a result of a longstanding bilateral relationship with the Sudanese government. “There was something published at a higher level, but behind the scenes, it was all very granular,” Bo said. “Every week, we would submit three things. Like, okay, air access. Where are we on airports?”

In Sudan, Darfur, an area of RSF stronghold, faces a particularly dire situation, where Doctors Without Borders (MSF) estimated a child was dying every two hours. Part of the reason for this dire situation is the inability of aid groups to access the region.<sup>74</sup> USAID implementing partners could not get approvals to operate in Darfur because of a mandate from the HAC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that all aid had to go through Port Sudan on the Red Sea. The UN and most other NGOs followed suit to deliver aid through Port Sudan. “Because humanitarian coordination is led by the UN, they were not loudly advocating for Darfur because they thought it would affect their ability to work with staff,” Bo said. As a result, the major thrust of the BHA response was to advocate for access to Darfur.

While far from perfect, BHA enabled certain aid to reach Darfur. “We saw that MSF had trucks of medicines going to North Darfur that had been stuck for 13 weeks, we sent that through this channel,” Bo said. “The next day, the trucks were moving—so things started to work a little better.” One major marker of progress was how BHA ensured assistance could cross conflict lines and borders. BHA funded an operation with WFP operating from Chad, and NGOs and UNICEF building up a supply across Chad to land in Duala, Cameroon, and eventually into

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<sup>74</sup> “How Many Have Died in Sudan’s Civil War?”

Darfur, Bo said. “Hugely expensive, not efficient, but kind of the only way for humanitarian commodities and personnel to get into Darfur.”

“USAID has that cadre of people with experience in humanitarian negotiations, with experience in international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, who have been on the ground negotiating access as implementers,” Bo said. “All of that is lost now.” US-led diplomatic communications and discussions led to criticism from the Sudanese, Russian, Chinese, and African governments over interference in domestic matters, he elaborated. I pushed back on this point: What about the expertise of multilateral organizations and NGOs? Could they feasibly have made progress without invoking geopolitical criticism? Bo clarified that on a day-to-day basis, NGOs and the UN engage in negotiations over access. Published examples include UN negotiations with the Taliban over women’s rights.<sup>75</sup> NGOs and organizations like the UN arrive in the country with the approval of the host government, Bo said. “To have someone publicly say, oh, there's a famine, and the Sudanese government is blocking assistance, or whatever they're going to say, they're going to kick you out of the country.” Without these constraints, USAID can speak up when other organizations cannot or to provide top cover for implementing partners to speak out with USAID protection.

While it may be true that USAID’s response to the crisis in Sudan was hampered by bureaucratic inefficiencies, the loss of US humanitarian assistance has had immense consequences on the region. Over 1,100 communal kitchens or 80% of the emergency food kitchens to help starving people have been shut down. The State Department issued an exemption for emergency food assistance, but in practice food assistance has been hampered without USAID as a result of the obliteration of normal channels for processing assistance

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<sup>75</sup> “Afghanistan: UN Will ‘Continue to Engage’ with Taliban, Following Threat to Withdraw Cooperation | UN News,” August 30, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/08/1153806>.

waivers.<sup>76</sup> Other agencies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who would normally also help have been strained as they primarily received funding from the United States.<sup>77</sup> Future funding to address this crisis remains uncertain.

### **Complex Crisis in Mozambique**

Mozambique provides an example of a “complex crisis” influenced by climate, where BHA’s increasing shift to promoting resilience has been critical. In fiscal year 2023, Mozambique faced armed conflict in addition to severe damage from tropical cyclones. In the Cabo Delgado province of northern Mozambique, an estimated two million people were in need of humanitarian assistance due to non-state armed group attacks. Conflict and climate shocks caused an estimated 2.6 million people to face food insecurity in 2023. Damaged infrastructure from the weather and conflict also worsened an existing cholera outbreak.<sup>78</sup> One Institutional Contractor, Dylan\*, focused on the Mozambique portfolio, which included basic humanitarian response efforts, agricultural intervention, and RFSAs for improving development and resilience in shock-affected areas.<sup>79</sup> BHA was principally responsible for an initial response after natural disasters, whereas the development response would shift to different areas of USAID.

Nonetheless, working on BHA’s Mozambique projects required a thorough understanding of how these goals aligned.

I spoke to Dylan after he had formally received his termination notice but before he left his post. He described the sudden and chaotic shifts that unfolded after the Trump administration.

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<sup>76</sup> “Sudan Conflict: USAID Cut Hits People ‘Screaming from Hunger,’” February 25, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy7x87ev5jyo>.

<sup>77</sup> “Sudan Conflict.”

<sup>78</sup> “Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance - Annual Report for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 - World | ReliefWeb.”

<sup>79</sup> Dylan\*, interview by Emily Shi, Zoom Call, April 20, 2025.

His team shifted from 12 active people to three, two of whom were not previously on the team but backfilled for people on administrative leave or terminated. The logistics behind these terminations have also been inconsistent. “I’ve gotten fired three times in the past two months...people get termination letters every other day depending on their hiring mechanism,” Dylan said. “Everyone has a different bomb counting down for when they’ll have to leave and they have to stop working.” As for the functioning of the remaining team, Dylan said limited familiarity with portfolios hampered their ability to continue regular programming.<sup>80</sup> The Mozambique portfolio fell from 16 active awards worth \$181 million to six worth \$90 million. The active and maintained awards were connections with Public International Organizations (PIOs) like the World Food Program and UNICEF. USAID’s connection to groups local to Mozambique, including local NGOs and smaller aid groups, was severed.

The loss of these connections has damaged BHA’s ability to contribute to coordination efforts. He gave the example of their work to stabilize displaced populations in Cabo Delgado, where BHA lacked visibility and access to those populations without connections to local groups. Dylan’s experience shed light on how disruptive immediate terminations of awards were, even for cases of life-saving assistance, where the Trump Administration then offered waivers or rescinded terminations; for many projects, he said that award terminations were rescinded, but stop-work orders stayed in place, creating confusion.<sup>81</sup> “Even if the WFP award in Mozambique is cleared to continue, they can’t. They don’t have the resources to pay staff to do distributions or to do screenings,” Dylan said. While larger organizations may have the capacity to deal with cost-cutting, many smaller NGOs do not. “It’s honestly disrupting the entire sector, and there’s not a donor that can come in behind us to fill this void...we’re going to continue to see that a lot

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<sup>80</sup> Dylan\*.

<sup>81</sup> Dylan\*.

of NGOs are going to be scrambling to continue operations, and most likely, those that haven't had a significant chance to develop their capacity will dissolve.”

## **Conclusion**

These three case studies illustrate the destruction that ensued after the sudden dismantling of institutional humanitarian capacity. BHA's work has a vast scope globally, so I do not claim these studies as necessarily representative or applicable to every action taken and change caused. Nonetheless, these studies all echoed the unique space that BHA held in the humanitarian sphere, with an ability to provide technical expertise, on-the-ground coordination, and diplomatic discussion to due to institutional and interpersonal connections. BHA's work was imperfect, but my interviews shed light on the dedication and work of staffers and employees in allowing critical humanitarian services to reach those in the most need. Collectively they challenge the notion of USAID as a “fraud” and “waste” filled agency according to the Trump administration, or at the very least show these claims are exaggerated. In particular, the case study of Sudan highlights how BHA's work stumbled in geopolitically tense environments. While the inefficiencies and tension of providing aid in politicized environments warrant further discussion, the sudden dismantling of an entire institution was an improper solution.

The future of humanitarian assistance remains uncertain. Plans to move the remaining parts of USAID into the State Department will not be carried out until July 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>82</sup> Because the State Department focuses largely on managing foreign assistance in accordance with strategic grounds as opposed to needs, aid may be even further politicized, O'Connell said. The general

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<sup>82</sup> A. B. C. News, “After Months of Cuts, State Department Says It's Officially Shuttering USAID,” ABC News, accessed May 18, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/after-months-cuts-state-department-officially-shuttering-usaid/story?id=120267238>.

“America first” doctrine of the current administration may also exacerbate existing criticisms of the aid system as a vestige of imperialism. “I think we’re going to see a realignment that may be more reflective of traditional American imperialist activity,” Dylan said. “Whatever we get from this will be much worse than the viewed challenges of the current aid system.”

While it is difficult to consider humanitarian assistance post-USAID without a bleak outlook, some have proposed taking these changes as an opportunity to reconsider the field overall.<sup>83</sup> Considering a post-Trump 2.0 world, Hoover reflected: “maybe if we’re building from the ground up, we build it up right this time...maybe it could look a lot more coordinated, and maybe it could look bigger?” Still, interviewees highlighted that the dismantling of USAID is a story of immense loss—of experiential knowledge, of built-up connections and partnerships, of trust and engagement with local partners and governments.

This paper focused on USAID, but I also acknowledge that this is just one of many agencies that have been targeted by the Trump administration. O’Connell characterized the dismantling of USAID and the freezing of funds already appropriated by Congress as part of a broader constitutional crisis. In an opinion article, he called upon readers to contact their members of Congress.<sup>84</sup> Sarah N. has been heavily involved with advocacy and views herself in a unique position to whistle-blow, in part because of her lack of hope for USAID returning. “We are seeing this as a sacrificial moment, if we can use this as proof and evidence of what the administration is doing,” she said. “Maybe USAID was thrown to the wolves, but we’ll be able

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<sup>83</sup> Hippolyte Fofack, “Dismantling USAID Could Boost African Self-Reliance | by Hippolyte Fofack,” Project Syndicate, March 25, 2025, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-cuts-usaid-opportunity-for-africa-to-become-self-reliant-by-hippolyte-fofack-2025-03>.

<sup>84</sup> Stephen O’Connell, “Professor Stephen O’Connell: Letter to the Editor,” *The Phoenix* (blog), February 20, 2025, <https://swarthmorephoenix.com/2025/02/20/professor-stephen-oconnell-letter-to-the-editor/>.

to help save other government agencies and preserve what's left of our government as a whole..."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Sarah N, interview by Emily Shi, Signal Call, April 7, 2025.

## Table of Interviews

\*Asterisk denotes pseudonym

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Length and Date of Interview</b>
Anne*	Former Official	BHA, USAID	33 minutes on 4/18/25
Zoe*	Former Field Operations Desk Officer	BHA, USAID	47 minutes on 4/17/25
Bo*	Foreign Service Officer	BHA, USAID	53 minutes on 4/7/25, 49 minutes on 4/20/25
Haley Rotheram	Former Operations Manager	BHA, USAID	42 minutes on 4/24/25
Stephen O'Connell	Chief Economist from Jan 2014-Dec 2015	USAID	1 hour 48 minutes on 4/17/25
Andrew Sisson	Former Mission Director	USAID	57 minutes on 4/22/25
Grace*	Deputy Team Leader, South & Central Asia Team	BHA, USAID	1 hour 2 minutes on 5/10/25
Sam*	Former Acquisition & Assistance Specialist	BHA, USAID	35 minutes on 4/7/25
Connor*	Former Institutional Contractor	BHA, USAID	40 minutes on 4/9/25
Ian Bennett	Former Senior Project Manager	BHA, USAID	34 minutes on 4/22/25
Shawnee Hoover	Senior Organizational Learning Advisor	BHA, USAID	1h 41 minutes on 5/15/25
Sarah N	Operations and Communications Manager	USAID Implementing Partner	48 minutes on 4/7/25

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