

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 24, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary,

As we all work to contain and mitigate the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19), I would like to take a moment to express my concern over the manner in which you and other senior members of your staff have repeatedly referred to this disease as “the Wuhan Virus.” Yesterday morning, the Department of State put out a press release in your name which begins: “Supreme Leader Khamenei’s fabrications regarding the Wuhan Virus are dangerous and they put Iranians and people around the world at greater risk.” The Department’s spokesperson Morgan Ortugas also persists in referring to COVID-19 as “the Wuhan Virus,” spreading the term by making it a hashtag in a March 22 tweet.

As the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly’s Special Representative on Anti-Semitism, Racism, and Intolerance, I am obliged to point out that referring to this global pandemic by anything other than its appropriate, medical names is unhelpful at best, and at worst risks inflaming stereotypes, fear, and xenophobia in the face of a health crisis, the resolution which will depend upon robust international cooperation.

In the United States and around the world, throughout history and up to the present day, immigrants, foreigners, and “the other” have shouldered blame for society’s ills, including the spread of epidemics. In the 1300s, Jews were blamed for the spread of the bubonic plague, and following the appearance of syphilis in Europe during the renaissance, that illness was given varied and geographically inaccurate names such as the “French pox” or “the Spanish disease.”

In the 20th century, the identification of disease with national origin, ethnic group, or religion took on a more sinister character as one of a number of rationalizations for displacement, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide. Propaganda films collected by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example, clearly blamed Polish Jews for the spread of typhus in Nazi-occupied Europe.

The U.S. Government has, throughout its history, readily subscribed to the idea of scapegoating foreigners for epidemics. The Immigration Act of 1891 sought to block entry of immigrants suffering from “loathsome or contagious diseases,” but documentary and anecdotal evidence show that the prejudices of the times subjected arrivals at ports of entry to more rigorous examination based on their style of clothing, the languages they spoke, or the lower class of travel they booked for their crossings to the United States.

In July 2015, President Trump said that “tremendous infectious disease is pouring across the border” because of immigrants from Mexico and Latin America. It was disappointing, but not

surprising, therefore, when a *Washington Post* reporter last week captured a photo of President Trump's speech notes at the White House apparently edited to render "corona virus" as "Chinese virus."

The tone you and your senior staff set for the men and women of the State Department is crucial; U.S. diplomatic credibility abroad must not be compromised by the irresponsible use of the term "Wuhan Virus." Last Thursday, the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa reported on its website having received reports of a rise in anti-foreigner sentiment revolving around the announcement of COVID-19 in Ethiopia. These reactions prompted Prime Minister Abiy to caution his citizens against participating in any attacks targeting foreigners, further exhorting them to not bend to "fear and panic." Calling COVID-19 the "Wuhan Virus" or "Chinese Virus" nurtures this sense of fear and panic, and sows division at the moment where diplomacy and goodwill are most vital.

I ask that you and your staff please be mindful of using – both in verbal and written communication – only the recognized names for COVID-19 and the virus that causes the disease: SARS-CoV-2. To refer to this pandemic by an unofficial name that highlights regional or national origins is to risk stoking xenophobic sentiments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Benjamin L. Cardin".

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator