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Secret Sanctions Relief for Allegedly Corrupt Billionaire Demands Scrutiny

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Three anti-corruption organizations urged the internal watchdogs for the U.S. Treasury and State Departments to investigate the U.S. government’s inappropriate decision just before the change of U.S. administrations to effectively lift the sanctions on billionaire businessman Dan Gertler.

“More than a year later, there is still almost no official information from the U.S. government about its short-lived but alarming decision to secretly suspend Mr. Gertler’s sanctions,” said **Adam Keith, Director for Accountability at Human Rights First**, one of the organizations that sent [a letter](#) urging inspectors general at the Departments of the Treasury and State to investigate. “The public needs to understand how and why the previous administration took this step, which risked undermining fragile progress against corruption in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and suggested a playbook that individuals who are sanctioned for corruption or human rights abuse in the future may follow to dodge the consequences of their actions.”

Mr. Gertler was sanctioned in 2017 by the Trump administration under the U.S. government’s Global Magnitsky sanctions program for his alleged involvement in large-scale corruption in the DRC. In January 2021, the administration issued a license in secret that made it possible for Mr. Gertler to resume transactions that the sanctions had barred. Once it was leaked, that decision attracted bipartisan criticism: the incoming Biden administration [revoked](#) the license and [described](#) it as “inconsistent with America’s strong foreign policy interests in combatting corruption around the world,” and former senior Trump administration officials called it “[truly appalling](#)” and “[an abuse of the process](#).”

Following a variety of civil society efforts over the last year to secure greater transparency into this decision, Human Rights First, The Sentry, and Transparency International sent a letter asking the inspectors general of the Treasury and State Departments to investigate the basis for the license.

“The new administration quickly and rightfully withdrew Mr. Gertler’s license, but a lot of damage had already been done. To prevent a similar situation from occurring in the future, it is essential that the U.S. government provide greater transparency into what was behind this inexplicable policy shift,” said **Justyna Gudowska, Director of Illicit Finance Policy at The Sentry**.

These three organizations had previously joined Congolese anti-corruption advocates and other groups in [speaking out](#) against the unprecedented license to Mr. Gertler.

“Just as sanctioning a corrupt actor can help isolate and pressure them, lifting sanctions – if it’s done right – can help reward and reinforce positive changes in their behavior,” said **Gary Kalman, Director of Transparency International U.S.** “But we need to understand what happened with the Gertler license to restore public confidence in how the executive branch makes these decisions.”

The Global Magnitsky program imposes an asset freeze and visa restrictions on individuals found responsible for corruption or serious human rights abuse, and it has been a powerful tool for holding corrupt actors to account. Congress made the legislative mandate for Global Magnitsky permanent earlier this month when it [reauthorized](#) the 2016 statute that first launched the sanctions program.