

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 31, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

We write to express serious concern regarding the condition, operational strain, and crew welfare aboard the USS *Gerald R. Ford* Carrier Strike Group as its deployment approaches its tenth consecutive month at sea. The strike group has now been deployed for more than nine months, with indications that operations may continue beyond that mark.¹ This will place this deployment at the outer edge of, and potentially exceeding, standard Navy deployment timelines, and breaking the record of 294 days set by the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* in 2020.² The cumulative effects of an extended, high-tempo deployment raise significant concerns about force sustainability, crew endurance, and long-term readiness.

Recent reporting has raised serious concerns regarding conditions onboard the USS *Gerald R. Ford*. It has been reported that the *Ford* has experienced a significant onboard fire that resulted in widespread smoke exposure injuries affecting roughly 200 sailors and destroyed more than 100 sleeping areas.³ As a result, sailors and crew members were forced to sleep on the floor and on tables.⁴ While we commend the bravery and professionalism of the crew in containing the incident, this event underscores the sustained high-risk environment in which these sailors are operating.

These concerns are compounded by reports of degraded living conditions and equipment strain during this extended deployment, including loss of berthing capacity, persistent maintenance challenges, and declining crew morale.⁵ Taken together, these issues raise broader questions about the cumulative impact of prolonged high-tempo operations on both readiness and the well-being of deployed servicemembers.

While the carrier is expected to have repairs at Souda Bay in Greece, there is no reported and projected deployment timeline for when it will return into action. We recognize the strategic demands driving sustained naval presence in the region, particularly in light of ongoing operations in the CENTCOM AOR. However, maintaining readiness cannot come at the expense of force sustainability. Extended deployments, especially those approaching or exceeding historic norms, risk compounding fatigue, degrading performance, and placing unnecessary strain on sailors and critical ship systems.⁶

1 Mallory Shelbourne & Sam LaGrone, Fire Damage, Clogged Toilets, and Sinking Morale: USS Gerald R Ford to Set Sail for Repairs in Crete, *The Guardian* (Mar. 18, 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/mar/18/onboard-fire-uss-gerald-ford-aircraft-carrier>.

2 Helene Cooper, Fire on U.S. Aircraft Carrier Raged for Hours, Sailors Say, *N.Y. Times* (Mar. 16, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/16/us/politics/uss-ford-fire-iran-venezuela.html>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Shelbourne & LaGrone, *Fire Damage*, *supra* note 1.

Accordingly, we request that within 15 days of receiving this letter, the Department of Defense provide a classified briefing to members of the House Armed Services Committee. This briefing should include the following information:

- An assessment of the impact of the recent fire on crew habitability, berthing capacity, and operational readiness;
- A review of any long term impacts to future carrier deployments that might occur due to extended repair and maintenance requirements for the *Ford* and the rest of the strike group fleet;
- A synopsis of any maintenance “lessons learned” for future *Ford*-class carriers and suggested improvements and/or modifications;
- Data on crew fatigue, operational tempo, and any associated readiness risks identified by Navy leadership;
- A detailed explanation of maintenance challenges experienced during this deployment and mitigation measures taken;
- The policies and procedures in place to ensure adequate rest cycles, mental health support, and sustainable deployment practices; and
- Any plans for relief, rotation, or early return of the strike group in light of current conditions.

The United States Navy’s ability to project power globally depends not only on advanced platforms, but on the resilience and readiness of the sailors who operate them. Ensuring that deployment practices remain sustainable is essential to preserving both mission effectiveness and the long-term health of the force.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter and request a timely response.

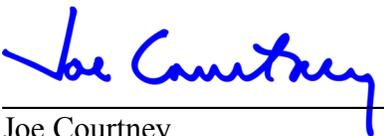
Sincerely,



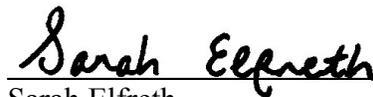
Wesley Bell
Member of Congress



John Garamendi
Member of Congress



Joe Courtney
Member of Congress



Sarah Elfreth
Member of Congress

⁶ Greg Myre, USS Ford Has Seen War, Fire and Plumbing Woes as It Nears a Record-Long Deployment, NPR (Mar. 17, 2026), <https://www.npr.org/2026/03/17/nx-s1-5746006/uss-ford-iran>.



Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



Chris Deluzio
Member of Congress



Eric Sorensen
Member of Congress



JM Tokuda
Member of Congress



Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress



Maggie Goodlander
Member of Congress



Jason Crow
Member of Congress