

UN agency for Palestinian refugees faces funding crisis



United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini holds a press conference at al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza City in October [File: Mahmud Hams/AFP]

United Nations, December 1 (RHC)-- The head of the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees has said it was unable to pay its 28,000 employees on time this month because of a major funding crisis, warning of potential cuts in vital services to millions of people amid a global pandemic.

UNRWA runs schools, clinics and food distribution programmes for millions of registered Palestinian refugees across the Middle East, mainly the descendants of Palestinians who were forcibly displaced from their towns and villages in what is now Israel in the run-up to its establishment in 1948.

The 5.7 million refugees mostly live in camps that have been transformed into built-up but often impoverished residential areas in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip, as well as Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini told reporters in Jordan on Tuesday that the resumption of United States support for the agency this year – which had been halted by the Trump administration – was offset by a reduction in funding by other donors.

The agency also went through a management crisis in 2019, when its previous head resigned amid allegations of sexual misconduct, nepotism and other abuses of authority at the agency.

Staff went on strike on Monday after being informed last week that salaries would be delayed, but halted the action following mediation, Lazzarini said. “If UNRWA health services are compromised in the middle of a global pandemic, COVID-19 vaccination rollout will come to an end. Maternal and child care will stop, half a million girls and boys not knowing if they can continue learning, and over two million of the poorest Palestinian refugees will not get cash and food assistance,” he said.

“The humanitarian needs of Palestinian refugees keep increasing while funding to the agency has stagnated since 2013.” Lazzarini said the agency raised enough donations at a recent conference in Brussels to cover up to 48 percent of its budget in 2022 and 2023. It also generated \$60 million towards a \$100 million shortfall until the end of the year to keep services running. “I’m still not yet in a position to say when the November salaries will be paid,” he said.

Critics of UNRWA, including Israel, accuse it of perpetuating the 73-year refugee crisis and say host nations should shoulder the burden of absorbing them.

The Palestinians say the refugees and their descendants have a “right of return” to their homes in what is now Israel, a position supported by host countries. Israel rejects that, noting that if such a right were fully implemented it would leave the country with a Palestinian majority.

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