

UN secretary-general says UNRWA is backbone of Gaza aid response

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United Nations, February 1 (RHC)-- UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has described the UN Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA) as “the backbone of all humanitarian response in Gaza” and appealed to all countries to “guarantee the continuity of UNRWA’s lifesaving work”.

Several countries including the United States, UNRWA's biggest donor, paused funding after Israel accused some agency staff of taking part in the October 7 attack by Hamas.

Speaking to the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP) on Wednesday, Guterres said he was "personally horrified" by the accusations waged against UNRWA staff but stressed the need to overcome the termination. "Yesterday, I met with donors to listen to their concerns and to outline the steps we are taking to address them," he said.

"I am extremely concerned by the inhumane conditions faced by Gaza's 2.2 million people, as they struggle to survive without any of the basics." Describing conditions inside the besieged enclave, the UN chief said heavy rains were flooding makeshift tent camps, forcing children, parents and the elderly to sleep in the mud. Clean water has become almost completely inaccessible and preventable diseases are rife, while the health system has collapsed.

The World Health Organization (WHO) on Wednesday warned of a "massive catastrophe" unfolding in Gaza.

"This is a population that is starving to death, this is a population that is being pushed to the brink," WHO's emergencies director Michael Ryan told a news conference. "The civilians of Gaza are not parties to this conflict and they should be protected, as should be their health facilities.

UN officials have warned that UNRWA will have to halt operations by the end of February if funding is not restored.

The heads of WHO, the World Food Program (WFP), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other agencies and partners said the allegations were "horrifying." "However, we must not prevent an entire organisation from delivering on its mandate to serve people in desperate need," they said in a joint statement. "No other entity has the capacity to deliver the scale and breadth of assistance that 2.2 million people in Gaza urgently need."

At a meeting of the UN Security Council on Gaza on Wednesday, UN aid chief Martin Griffiths said that UNRWA plays a fundamental role in the humanitarian response in Gaza. "To put it very simply and bluntly: Our humanitarian response for the occupied Palestinian territory is dependent, completely dependent, on UNRWA being adequately funded and operational," Griffiths told the 15-member council.

"UNRWA's lifesaving services ... to over three-quarters of Gaza's residents should not be jeopardised by the alleged actions of a few individuals. It is a matter of extraordinary disproportion," he said.

Griffiths added that the ability of the humanitarian community to reach the people of Gaza with aid remained "grossly inadequate." "We continue to face the issue of the rejection for entry of much-needed items into Gaza by Israel for reasons which, at least for us, are unclear and inconsistent," he said.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) last week ordered Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent its troops from committing genocide and take steps to improve the humanitarian situation of Palestinians in Gaza, in a case brought by South Africa.

In its highly anticipated interim ruling on Friday, the ICJ did not call for an immediate ceasefire but said Israel must promptly implement "immediate and effective" measures to guarantee the delivery of urgently required humanitarian aid and basic services to Gaza.

South Africa's Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor on Wednesday said all states have an obligation to stop funding and facilitating Israel's military actions in Gaza after the World Court made clear those actions have the potential to amount to genocide.

Israel must report to the court within a month on what it is doing to uphold the order to take all measures within its power to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza.

The accusations against UNRWA staff members became public on Friday, when the agency announced it had fired some staff after Israel provided information. Guterres said on Sunday that of 12 people implicated nine were fired, one is dead, and the identity of the remaining two was being clarified.

A six-page Israeli dossier said 12 UNRWA staff members took part in the October 7 attacks that killed 1,139 people. It also suggests Israel has wider evidence that UNRWA has employed 190 Hamas and Islamic Jihad fighters.

Later on Wednesday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said UNRWA had been “totally infiltrated” by Hamas and called for its termination. “It’s time for the international community and the U.N. itself to understand that UNRWA’s mission must be terminated,” Netanyahu told visiting UN delegates, according to a statement from his office.

The Palestinians have affirmed Israel falsified information to tarnish UNRWA.

Donors, including the European Union and several European nations, the United Kingdom, Japan and Canada, have suspended funding to the agency.

Riyad Mansour, the permanent observer to the UN for the Palestinian territories, told the UN Security Council on Wednesday there was no reason to “take measures that effectively amount to the collective punishment of 30,000 UNRWA staff and millions of refugees” who benefit from UNRWA’s services.

U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said that Washington is working to facilitate the delivery of more aid into Gaza, sidestepping reports that Israel has consistently blocked UN aid delivery efforts.

Thomas-Greenfield also said that the ICJ ruling was consistent with the US approach to Gaza, and that conditions for a ceasefire “do not exist.”

South Africa’s Pandor said Pretoria has done everything it can and now it is up to the global community to play its part by holding Israel accountable.

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