

UN agency for Palestinian refugees closes East Jerusalem headquarters following Israeli settlers' attacks



In this photo taken from a video, a fire lit by Israeli settlers can be seen on the grounds of the UNRWA headquarters in East al-Quds, on May 9, 2024.

Geneva, May 10 (RHC)-- The UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) has closed its east al-Quds (East Jerusalem) headquarters after Israeli settlers set fire to the compound's perimeter in the presence of the regime's forces.

"This evening, Israeli residents set fire twice to the perimeter of the UNRWA headquarters in occupied east Jerusalem [al-Quds]," the UNRWA's chief, Philippe Lazzarini, said on X, formerly Twitter, on Thursday. He described how "a crowd accompanied by armed men were witnessed outside the compound chanting 'Burn down the United Nations'."

Media reports said Israeli forces were present when settlers burned trees and grass on the building's property, but didn't prevent them. "While there were no casualties among our staff, the fire caused extensive damage to the outdoor areas," Lazzarini said.

According to UNRWA, the agency's staff members were present at the headquarters and worked to put out the fire. "Our director with the help of other staff had to put out the fire themselves as it took the Israeli fire extinguishers and police a while before they turned up," said Lazzarini.

"This is an outrageous development. Once again, the lives of UN staff were at serious risk."

Noting that it was the second attack on the compound, which has on its grounds petrol and diesel stations for a fleet of UN cars, in few days, Lazzarini said he decided to shut down the compound, given the ongoing security risk to the agency's staff members.

"In light of this second appalling incident in less than a week, I have taken the decision to close down our compound until proper security is restored."

The attack also comes after months of protests outside of the building by far-right Israeli settlers. One protest earlier this week "became violent when demonstrators threw stones at UN staff and at the buildings of the compound," Lazzarini said.

The UNRWA chief lamented that "over the past months, UN staff have regularly been subjected to harassment and intimidation." "Our compound has been seriously vandalized and damaged. On several occasions, Israeli extremists threatened our staff with guns."

Lazzarini urged a probe into the attacks, saying that UN staff, property, and operations "should be protected at all times in line with international law." "The perpetrators of these attacks must be investigated and those responsible must be held accountable," he added. "Anything less will set a new dangerous standard."

The head of the UN agency for Palestinians has called for a probe and accountability for what he described as "blatant disregard" for the UN operations in Gaza.

Condemnations pour in following settlers' attack:

The Palestinian Authority decried Thursday's arson attack and called on the international community to take "strict measures" against Israeli "militias."

Qatar's Foreign Ministry also condemned the "systematic Israeli targeting of UNRWA", maintaining it aimed "to liquidate it and deprive millions of Palestinians of its necessary services."

Saudi Arabia and Jordan also slammed the attack, with Amman urging measures to force Israel to "assume its responsibility as the occupying power in Jerusalem [al-Quds]" and put an end to the harassment.

UNRWA, the biggest humanitarian aid provider in Gaza which has been subjected to a genocidal Israeli war for seven months, has been in crisis since earlier this year when the Israeli regime claimed that dozens of its 13,000 Gaza employees were involved in the October 7 operation launched by Hamas resistance movement against the occupying entity.

The regime's allegations against UNRWA prompted more than 10 donor countries, including the United States, Germany, the European Union, Canada, and Japan, to temporarily withhold financial support, threatening the agency's efforts to deliver desperately needed aid in Gaza.

The funding from these countries makes up the bulk of all funding received by the UN agency.

Last month, an independent review for the UN, led by ex-French minister Catherine Colonna, underscored the lack of substantiation for broader allegations made by Israel that accused numerous UNRWA employees of affiliation with Hamas or Islamic Jihad resistance groups.

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