

Despite UN appeal, U.S. and UK don't fund critical lifeline to Palestinians

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United Nations, July 13 (RHC)-- The United Nations chief has led an internationally backed effort to support its agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) but has yet to persuade its biggest Western donors.

The United States and the United Kingdom, key allies of Israel, have continued to financially block the main organisation delivering humanitarian aid to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere.

Fourteen of the 16 donor nations resumed funding after suspending it in January, when Israel accused members of the organisation of having taken part in the October 7 Hamas-led attacks that killed more than 1,100 people in southern Israel.

The U.S. was the UNRWA's biggest donor, but Congress has banned any payments to the agency until March 25, 2025.

An independent review in April found that Israel has not presented credible evidence for its claims. There is a separate investigation into the October attack itself, by the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told a pledge conference in New York on Friday that the UNRWA faces "a profound funding gap" and that without financial support to the organisation "Palestinian refugees will lose a critical lifeline and the last ray of hope for a better future".

"Let me be clear – there is no alternative to UNRWA," he said, also warning that Israeli evacuation orders are forcing Palestinians "to move like human pinballs across a landscape of destruction and death."

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini thanked the 118 countries that signed on to a shared commitment to support and bolster financial and political support for the agency as it "undergoes unprecedented attacks and systematic attempts to dismantle it".

Lazzarini said he was hopeful the UK – which elected a new Labour government last week – would soon resume its financial support. He said the organisation has currently secured funding from donor countries until September, but the total amount in pledges won't be known until next week.

According to Lazzarini, there are now 600,000 Palestinian "girls and boys of the age of primary and secondary school living in the rubble, deeply traumatised", who need the UNRWA's help to restart their education.

The initiative to support the organisation at the UN was spearheaded by Slovenia, Jordan and Kuwait and was signed by all 15 members of the UN Security Council.

Hassan Barari, professor of international affairs at Qatar University, told Al Jazeera that Israel has been trying for years to defund the UNRWA because they believe that the organisation has been effective in helping Palestinian refugees.

"They think that if they defund UNRWA then the Palestinians would be in their own societies and forgotten in the years to come," he said. "This is the continuation of the Israeli attempt to defund UNRWA in order to kill the refugee file from any future negotiations."

Lex Takkenberg, former chief of UNRWA's ethics office, told Al Jazeera that the agency is the only international body with an elaborate neutrality framework that includes staff training, financial checks and inspections of its installations.

"It can never be ruled out that there are abuses, as in any other organisation, but it is doing an amazing job in providing support to Palestinians in the direst circumstances," he said, adding that the agency was going above and beyond to operate according to humanitarian principles.

Takkenberg said Israel did not present credible evidence to support its claims that UNRWA staff took part in the October 7 attacks. These claims instead served to normalise raids against the UNRWA and its facilities, which have become "an integral part of the onslaught in Gaza", he said.

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